


BOOKS THAT BRING LIFE

VOLUME 2

BY EUGENE W. BRICE





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Books That Bring Life Series

Books That Bring Life, Volume 1

Books That Bring Life, Volume 2

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Eugene Brice

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Books That Bring Life, Volume 2

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Dedication

To Liz, with Love

Preface

Christian people want to know the Bible. That much seems clear. It follows, then, that one of the primary responsibilities of preachers and church school teachers is to devise ways to present biblical content in an informative and yet "listenable" way.

This book, in an effort to do just that, follows an earlier volume titled *Books That Bring Life*. Each chapter deals with the theme of a particular book of the Bible. Although specific portions of the individual books are emphasized, it is the biblical book itself which is stressed. Why was this book written? What was its setting in history? What does it have to say to us today?

Because these chapters were presented originally in sermon form, one purpose is to inform and encourage. But even more than this, the purpose is to send the reader back to read the specific biblical book being discussed. Since much use has been made in adult church school classes of *Books That Bring Life*, discussion questions have been added at the close of each chapter in this volume.

Twenty-two books of the Bible are described in the eighteen chapters which follow, fourteen from the Old Testament and eight from the New Testament. The two books of Kings are treated as one, as are Ezra-Nehemiah, Haggai-Zechariah, and I and II Timothy. Various types of biblical literature are represented. Numbers is one of the books of law, the Pentateuch; I and II Kings, Ezra, and Nehemiah are books of history. Isaiah, Joel, Obadiah, Micah, Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi are prophetic books. The Song of Solomon and Lamentations are books of wisdom.

In the New Testament, two of the Gospels, Matthew and Luke, are discussed, as are four letters attributed to Paul: Romans, Ephesians, and I and II Timothy. The letter to the Hebrews and the letter of James complete the twenty-two books.

Readers of the Bible discover again and again that each reading brings new, often unexpected, truth. If this volume succeeds in sending its readers back to the books of the Bible for new and exciting insights, it will have achieved its purpose.

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"On the third new moon after the people of Israel had gone forth out of the land of Egypt, on that day they came into the wilderness of Sinai." Exodus 19:1

"Then all the congregation raised a loud cry; and the people wept that night. And all the people of Israel murmured against Moses and Aaron; the whole congregation said to them, 'Would that we had died in the land of Egypt! . . .'" Numbers 14:1-2

"So Moses the servant of the Lord died there in the land of Moab, according to the word of the Lord, and he buried him in the valley in the land of Moab opposite Beth-peor; but no man knows the place of his burial to this day." Deuteronomy 34:5-6

1

Numbers: A Wilderness Remembered

Suppose word came to you that someone had given you a trip to the Holy Land. Which part of that fabled land would you most like to see? Many would immediately choose Jerusalem with its Mount of Olives and Via Dolorosa. Others would choose the tranquil Sea of Galilee, or the desolation of the Dead Sea. But I confess to a different choice.

If I ever go, what I want to see most is the wilderness. I will leave you your Dome of the Rock and Mount of Olives, and choose instead that jagged spur of land that shoots like a growth southward from Israel. I want to see Mt. Sinai and the bitter springs of Mara and the wilderness of Paran. What magnificent desolation! No wonder the ancient ones considered it holy, for they thought that only God could survive there.

Now think of the hero named Moses. Almost all of Moses' ministry was in that wilderness. He didn't just "serve a term and move up." The last forty years of his life, Moses ministered in the wilderness. How did it happen? Moses must have been the first religious leader to hear the now-familiar offer: if you can get enough people to go with you, you get a free trip to the Holy Land! Moses heard the offer, and he accepted the challenge.

The book of Exodus tells of Moses organizing the trip and getting the people of Israel out of slavery in Egypt. Then, after Leviticus, comes Numbers. Exodus and Numbers are the second and fourth books of what the

Jewish people call "The Law of Moses," the first five books of the Old Testament, sometimes called the Pentateuch. These books begin with the creation of the world and end with the Israelites ready to enter the Promised Land. Numbers tells of their journey through the wilderness. Moses' group of Israelites encountered terrorists by the score as well as almost insurmountable delays. They ran into Amorites and Ammonites and Canaanites, and trouble resulted. As a result, it took forty years for the people to get from Egypt to Canaan, a direct journey of only 200 miles.

Numbers tells of Moses' assignment of leading that grumbling group of people on that journey. His assignment, mind you, was not just to get *himself* to the Promised Land. That would have been easy. He could have taken a small group of enthusiastic Israelites straight there in a week or two. Many were eager to go, excited and courageous. But like a modern-day minister, Moses' assignment was not to get *himself* to the Promised Land, but rather to lead the whole group (including grumblers and fault-finders and doubters) as close to the Promised Land as he could. It meant arguments and delays and much slower going than many of the enthusiastic ones would have liked. But this was his task.

The title of the book of Numbers comes from the fact that on two occasions, Moses "numbered" the people. He took a census, once as they started out (chapter 1) and once as they ended the journey (chapter 26). The book could more aptly have been called "The Book of Wilderness," for years later when these stories were written down, it was the wilderness they remembered most, not the two times Moses took a census. The wilderness experience became one of the most important themes of Jewish religion, and it remains so to this day. It is a universal theme, because most of us find that we spend much more time in the wilderness of life than we do in the Promised Land. Consider, then, from the book of Numbers, these lessons learned from that wilderness remembered.

The wilderness is inevitable in every life. Every Promised Land is bordered by wilderness, and we cannot arrive in any Promised Land I can think of without going through wilderness.

A happy marriage? Most of us look on this as a Promised Land of sorts. Yet most of us know that there is a fine line between wilderness and paradise, and that at home we wander back and forth across that line with curious frequency. We don't like the wilderness at home. It is miserable. But with remarkable stubbornness, we do all the things that get us there. Some of us have protracted stays in the wilderness at home. We divide the tribe and go in different directions. But we stay in the wilderness until we agree on what for us is the Promised Land and how we will get there together. Wilderness is inevitable at home.

It is inevitable in order to attain almost any desired goal. Do we want to enter a profession, or learn music, or attain an athletic skill? The long wilderness of a college and graduate degree must be endured before the profession can be entered. The long hours of practice on the instrument must be endured before the recital can be played. The "drudgerous" days of training when there's no one there to cheer must be endured before the championship can be won. Even Bible study has its wilderness, when we are confronted with issues that have no easy resolution and require hard thought. The closer we get to the light, the more shadows are cast, and this sometimes comes as a surprise to us when we think the study of the Bible offers us nothing but the milk and honey of the Promised Land. In so many ways, the only route to the Promised Land runs through wilderness, and Numbers reminds us of this.

It's a hard balance, but a necessary one, recognizing the inevitability of wilderness, but not surrendering to it. Driving through one of the bleaker sections of Texas, I used to notice a little mobile home erected on a scrubby lot a hundred miles outside of Fort Worth. It was a simple mobile home in sparse surroundings to which some young husband had brought his new wife. Bleak prairies, desolate, lonely--and yet, above the driveway that entered the lot, the owner had put a sign that named his place: "Cloud Nine." Someone had actually set up housekeeping on "cloud nine."

This is the idea! Recognize the inevitability of wilderness, but don't surrender to it. Don't decorate your living room, or your life, in Sinai brown.

A second fact to be recognized about the wilderness experiences of life is that they present real dangers to us. They did to Moses and the Israelites. Enemies outside constantly endangered them. But there were inner enemies, too, and these proved to be the ones that almost destroyed them. There was disunity and discouragement and bitterness. A wilderness time of life brings dangerous inner problems, and we need to scout them out and recognize them when they come.

In wilderness moments, for example, we get confused, and later we wonder at the foolish things we did in that time of discouragement. Get a Bible atlas sometime and look at the route the people of Israel took in the wilderness. It makes no sense. They turned left when they should have turned right, they retraced their steps, they got to the very edge of the Promised Land and inexplicably turned around. Are you ever bewildered at what to do in the darker moments of life? Don't be surprised because literally, the word "be-wilder" means "to be put in the wilderness." To be "disoriented" literally means not to know which direction is east, to be lost. The wilderness confuses us.

And it demoralizes us. In Numbers, we find the story of Moses sending spies to scout out the Promised Land, to see whether they could conquer it

(chapter 13). Ten of the twelve spies came back discouraged, saying that compared to the giants in Canaan, the Israelites seemed but grasshoppers in their sight.

Wilderness does that to us. It demoralizes us, blinding us to the true good that exists right now. All we can think about or see is what we *don't* have, a Promised Land that isn't there. Think of it! For forty years, Moses was trying to get somewhere he wasn't! Someone came up with what they called a six-word definition of hell: "I wish I were somewhere else!" For forty years, they wished they were somewhere else, and thus the wilderness tended to get inside them. The task, then, became not so much to get themselves out of the wilderness, as it was to get the wilderness out of themselves.

A certain number of wilderness experiences are inevitable, and they bring the dangers of confusion and discouragement with them.

But the wilderness experience *can* be one of the most satisfying times of life. The old chorus says, "Melt me, mold me, fill me, use me!" And any wilderness can do the melting for us. The wilderness was the furnace that forged a strong, unified group of people and then left them poised on the edge of the Promised Land they had so long desired. It made a hero out of Moses and a people out of Israel. And in the centuries that followed, prophets and poets referred constantly to that wilderness remembered. Psalm after Psalm in the Old Testament sang of the wilderness (Psalm 68, 78, 136), and the prophets saw that period as the crucial, formative time for Israel (Isaiah 43, Jeremiah 2, Ezekiel 20, Hosea 13).

Is that so strange? Most of our best family stories are of wilderness times. We drive the children past that cramped upstairs apartment where we started married life. We chuckle over pictures of what life was like and how little money we had to spend. The worst moments of our lives were important steps along the way to our present and even our future.

So the journey is what is most important, isn't it? Moses, the greatest hero of the Old Testament, never made it to the Promised Land. Numbers ends with Moses looking across the Jordan at the Land of Promise, but he never made it. Yet he died fulfilled. Meaning and happiness came for him *in the middle of the wilderness* while he was busy at his task. Happiness usually comes in by a door we don't remember leaving open--and so for Moses. We are led back to Jesus again. "Whoever saves his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it." (Matthew 10:39, paraphrase)

Those who journey in the northern parts of the wilderness of Sinai remind us that from the hills of Moab, the Promised Land can be clearly seen. Think of it! Most of the last years on that journey, the people of Israel could see Canaan right over there to the northwest, only fifteen or twenty miles away.

Right there it was! The Promised Land could always be seen from the wilderness, and the wilderness from the Promised Land, so close were they together.

So it is for us. In the worst of your wilderness moments, remember it: The Promised Land is always but one decision away, and you, no doubt, know what that decision is for you. It is the heart of Christian faith, and it gives encouragement to every one of us who finds the going hard, and it says to us that just beyond every wilderness, there is a Promised Land.

Study Questions

1. Do you agree that Moses had as much responsibility to get the grumblers to the Land of Promise as he did the eager ones? Does that describe your minister's task?

2. How well did your church do in negotiating its most recent wilderness experience? How well did *you* do?

3. Do you think anyone escapes the wilderness in this life?

4. Name some recent wilderness moments our nation has experienced. Did we manage them well? What mistakes did we make?

5. Can you think of some people who live in the wilderness all their lives? How do they do it?

6. Someone has said, "Change your attitude and you change your world." Do you agree? What does this say about wilderness moments?

"In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes." Judges 21:25

"But the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel; and they said, 'No! but we will have a king over us, that we also may be like all the nations, and that our king may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles.'" I Samuel 8:19-20

"He [Nadab] did what was evil in the sight of the Lord, and walked in the way of his father, and in his sin which he made Israel to sin." I Kings 15:26

A Lesson from Kings

Two men are arguing about a subject frequently in the news. "Listen," says the first, "we Americans get the leaders we deserve. Our leaders are not going to be any better than *we* are, and we're not very good. If we can get ourselves in hand and return to an integrity we've lost, then we are going to have leaders of integrity. But you cannot expect righteous leadership from an unrighteous nation."

The other man speaks with the gentleness typical of many political discussions. "You have utterly lost your mind," he says. "A nation doesn't determine the integrity of its leaders--it's the other way around. The leaders determine the integrity of a nation. Good leaders lift us up--bad ones pull us down. You cannot expect a righteous nation when you've got unrighteous leaders."

We leave our two friends arguing out in the hall and look at the question ourselves. What do *you* think? Do our leaders simply and inevitably reflect the nation's morality, or do they determine it? Now this is not just an idle "which came first, the chicken or the egg" question. It is a question with particular importance to us every election day when we choose our state and national leadership, and it has immense implications for our nation.

A book in the Bible has as its central topic the very question we posed a moment ago: how important are leaders in the life of a nation? This is the book of Kings, a book long enough to have been divided into two sections, I and II Kings of the Old Testament.

It is an exciting book. Action crackles on every page. Were it made into a movie, the ad writers would have an easy time producing provocative copy. Murder, treason, war, revenge, lust, incest, adultery, intrigue--all these are present, and the movie could well end up with an R-rating. But the book also includes great moments of heroism, martyrdom, courage, faith, and adventure.

Briefly described, it tells of the kings of Israel and the history of the nation Israel from about 950 B.C. down to about 580 B.C., 400 years of history. Maybe the study of history does not stir you very much. Napoleon once said that history was nothing but a fable agreed on. William Cullen Bryant spoke of "the horrid tale of perjury and strife, murder and spoil, which we call history."¹ Henry Ford expressed another opinion. "History," he said, "is bunk."

But history is also the story of the slow unfolding of God's purposes in the world, and, as someone stated it so well, if we do not learn from history, we are doomed to repeat it.

Here is a brief synopsis of the book. As told in the earlier books of Samuel, David had created a united nation out of the warring tribes of Israel, and his kingdom had been great. But now, as the book of Kings opens, David dies. His son, Solomon, succeeds him, and the temple is built in Jerusalem. When Solomon dies, the uneasy union of northern and southern tribes dissolves, and civil war erupts.

Kings rise and fall in both the northern and southern kingdoms of Israel and Judah. Here we read the story of Jezebel and her husband, of Elijah the prophet and Elisha, his successor, and many others. In 722 B.C., Assyria defeats Israel and carries the "Ten Lost Tribes" off into eternal exile. This is the historical setting for the great prophets, Amos and Hosea, Isaiah and Jeremiah. The southern kingdom of Judah struggles on until 586 B.C., when she falls to Babylon. Jerusalem and the temple are destroyed. The book of Kings comes to an end in 586 B.C. with this great defeat, and the exile begins.

The book was written in Hebrew, probably around 400 B.C., and became very quickly a part of Israel's Scripture. As a description of the historical process that was to lead to Jesus Christ, it was also included as a part of Christian Scripture. It describes 400 years of Hebrew history, but one question, one central theme, returns again and again: how well did each king do in guiding the nation? What kind of leader was he? At the end of the description of each king's reign, there is a brief assessment of his integrity. How well did he do?

Back, then, to our question: do national leaders determine the moral level of the nation, or does the nation determine the moral level of its leaders? A strong case can be made for the latter, that a country gets just what it deserves and no more. The king, or the president, will be just as good as the na-

tion is, but no better, and maybe even worse. There is a fable in the book of Judges (chapter 9) that takes this position.

According to the fable, the trees once decided to select a king over them. They asked the olive tree to rule over them, but the olive was busy. Then they asked the fig tree, but the fig couldn't accept the honor. So also with the grapevine. Finally, they said to the bramble bush, "Come, you reign over us," and happily the thorn bush accepted the nomination and ruled over the trees. They got exactly what they deserved. Their own apathy and indifference determined what kind of leader they got. By implication, then, that writer is saying that the nation largely determines what will be the quality of moral leadership of its leader.

This is a somewhat cynical view of leadership, and it is not the view of the book of Kings. According to this book, Israel's leaders always determined the moral level of the nation at any given moment. If the king was good, the nation was led to goodness. If the king was evil, the very worst in the nation was called forth.

Read the book, and you will find repeated over and over again one burning statement about the various kings. "In his sin," the statement repeats frequently, "in his sin, he made all Israel to sin" (paraphrase of I Kings 15:26, 15:34, 16:19, 22:52, II Kings 3:3, 10:29, 13:6, 14:24, and so forth). That statement occurs time after time in the book, describing a score of Israel's kings. How critically important is the leadership of a nation! "In his sin, he made all Israel to sin."

For national leaders, there are no nicely private little sins. They ferment and bubble up and out, and their poison drips down into countless lives. "In his sin, he made all Israel to sin."

This truth and its burden hits us on so many levels of life. If the policeman is corrupt, if the teacher is careless with truth, if the preacher lacks integrity, if the banker is dishonest, if the congressman or woman is crooked, . . . You complete the sentence. "In his sin, he made all Israel to sin." No person must be a president, a senator, a leader, but people who accept that role accept a very special responsibility for the narrow gate of integrity, since their actions spill over into the lives of so many other people.

So, says Kings, with national leaders, kings and presidents and all the rest, tremendous obligations for integrity come with high office. Every national leader ought to read Kings and see how national morality was so greatly affected by the personal morality of its leaders.

This is why we have a right and an obligation to demand the narrow gate of integrity in high office. We must not merely suggest morality, or recommend morality, but demand it. We must say that whether that office is as an elder in the church or a preacher in the pulpit or a police officer on the beat

or a president in office, we demand integrity, high integrity, unusual integrity, stubborn integrity. We demand men and women who will lift us up. We demand leaders who will not exploit the worst in us and play on our prejudices and fears, but leaders who will draw out of us, perhaps painfully, and magnify in us our best instincts and make us better than we want to be.

In that regard, George Aiken, commenting on his completion of thirty-four years in the United States Senate, said that the politicians he had known *were no greater or lesser sinners than the average person listed in the telephone book*. What do you think of that?

An unprepared school boy ventured a guess one time when the teacher asked him, "What is the Matterhorn?"

He answered, "The Matterhorn is a large horn to be blown whenever something is the matter."

If Senator Aiken was right, maybe that horn needs blowing now! The persons who determine our national destiny are no better, no worse than anyone else in the phone book. Is it any wonder that the whole moral structure of our nation sinks lower every year?

It is difficult for young people today to picture what American society was like just twenty years ago. Profanity was only infrequently used in movies and plays, and gross vulgarities and obscenities, never. Pornographic literature could be found only in back rooms, and television fare reflected fairly middle-class American values. Drugs were occasionally found, but only among the misfits and losers of life. Now what has happened?

In order for evil to succeed, someone has said, it is only necessary that good people do nothing. Is that our problem? Integrity is dying the death of good people's silence! One after another, our moral standards weaken and wither away, and we are silent. Thus, we elect leaders who are no better and no worse than any of the rest of us.

Yet, read the word of God and you find it clearly stated: the moral level of the nation's leaders determines the moral level of the nation. This is the lesson from Kings--the importance of courageous integrity on the part of national leaders. And we must begin to make it clear in this grand nation of ours that whatever the cost of integrity, however it may offend our prejudices, however inconvenient or embarrassing or costly it may be, we will simply not settle for anything less.

And this, I think, is where the coming of Jesus Christ leads us: an unwillingness to sell out our integrity, a realization that God has placed in us a nobility and a grandness greater than we suspect, and that the more we give ourselves to him, the more that latent nobility comes shining through. Wherever you are, then, at this present moment in life, the lesson is clear.

Integrity! Integrity as fathers, as mothers, as leaders of a family. Integrity as bankers, lawyers. Integrity as Sunday school teachers, integrity as legislators and presidents. There simply is no substitute for it on any level, and our nation's life may depend on whether or not we learn this. For Israel finally fell, not because of the enemy without, but because of the enemy within--corruption and injustice and unrighteousness.

More than 150 years ago, Charles Dickens began his *Tale of Two Cities* with a paragraph describing the chaotic time in which he lived: "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times, it was the age of wisdom, it was the age of foolishness, it was the epoch of belief, it was the epoch of incredulity, it was the season of Light, it was the season of Darkness, it was the spring of hope, it was the winter of despair . . ."

So it always is with us as a nation and as individuals. Always present is this curious mixture of hope and despair. As we make our own lonely decisions for or against integrity, we decide for so many others whether it is to be the winter of despair or the springtime of hope.

Study Questions

1. Does God really control the fate of the nations? If so, how?
2. If a nation is found wanting, will God inevitably bring it down? How soon? Even the United States?
3. Do you agree with Senator Aiken that our leaders are no better and no worse than we are? Should this be?
4. On the whole, have our national leaders made us better or worse?
5. Does God intervene in our national elections? Should a candidate claim to run as a response to God's will?
6. Do you think that religion enters enough into our national politics? Too much? About right? Why?

"This Ezra went up from Babylonia. He was a scribe skilled in the law of Moses which the Lord the God of Israel had given" Ezra 7:6

"And Ezra the priest stood up and said to them, 'You have trespassed and married foreign women, and so increased the guilt of Israel. Now then make confession to the Lord the God of your fathers, and do his will; separate yourselves from the people of the land and from the foreign wives.'" Ezra 10:10-11

"And they said to me, . . . 'The wall of Jerusalem is broken down, and its gates are destroyed by fire.' When I heard these words I sat down and wept, and mourned for days" Nehemiah 1:3-4

3

Ezra-Nehemiah: The Wall Builders

The retired minister sat reminiscing about his forty-three years of preaching ministry. He had served seven churches in that time, ranging from a seventy-five-member church in a farm community to a city church of several thousand members.

"You know what my wife and I like to do sometimes?" he said. "Sometimes when we're in the middle of a long drive across Kansas, we play this game of imagining that God is going to let us start all over with a church of 200 members. Only he's going to let *us* pick the 200. We are to remember back through these forty-three years and pick out the 200 people we want to include. We quickly think of some we would bequeath to the church down the street and some that we would keep for ourselves. It would be the ideal church, the cream of the crop of those seven churches. I don't know what that church would end up being like, but it's fun to think about it."

How about you? Suppose you could pick out your own 200 people and your own ideal preacher and establish your own ideal church. Whom would you select? Or better, what *kind* of people would you select?

Most of us would probably pick out people who reflect and reinforce our own points of view. I surely would want folks who believe in foreign missions and who give generously of their income. A 200-member church made up of average families, all of whom tithe, would have a superb budget, so there

would be no financial problems. I would want people who were broad-minded and open, but who take faith seriously, and like good music, and who would all sing with enthusiasm when hymn time came, and who would help with church school and youth activities. And people who would greet strangers after church, and who would make reservations for Family Night Dinners (you see how narrow the circle starts getting?), and people who would not crunch on ice at a banquet, and who would not clip their nails on the row behind me. When we start drawing circles, they usually get narrower and narrower, and inevitably, our task becomes a matter not of drawing certain people we like *in*, but of drawing some we don't like *out*.

In a sense, that's what happened to a pair of Old Testament prophets 500 years before Christ. Their names were Ezra and Nehemiah, and their two short books lie next to one another in the later pages of the Old Testament. They lived in a time when starting over again was necessary for the Jewish people, and it was left to them to decide who was going to be in and who was going to be out.

Around 550 B.C., the people of Israel were in exile in Babylon, as prisoners of the Babylonians. Then Persia defeated Babylon, and the Jews were free to return to the destroyed city of Jerusalem. Ezra returned first, and discovered to his dismay that during the exile, they had started letting anybody into Jerusalem. All sorts of people were there. The Jews who had remained in Jerusalem had married Canaanite women and had accepted certain Canaanite customs. Ezra believed that only his kind of people should be permitted in the rebuilt city, and he thundered out his orders that all such mixed marriages were to be dissolved, that walls were to be built around the purity of the Jewish people and all others shut out. So Ezra set up strict rules that protected the people of Israel from any contact with outsiders. Up went the walls.

Then Nehemiah arrived and turned Ezra's symbolic wall building into a literal one. To ensure its safety, Jerusalem's city walls had to be rebuilt. The thirteen chapters of Nehemiah's book tell about this wall-building project, and then end with the people rejoicing over their safety behind the newly built walls. New rules and new walls, so that the rebuilt Jewish community would remain pure and undefiled.

Ezra and Nehemiah, the wall builders, reflect one side of a fundamental disagreement about religion's role, a disagreement that has continued to our day. Is the purpose of religion to protect us from any corruption from the outside world, or is it to send us right out into that corrupt world with the intention of transforming it? Within the Jewish faith itself there were supporters of both positions. Some maintained that God had chosen the Jews to be a "light to the nations," (Isaiah 42:6) and they wrote books like Ruth and Jonah, argu-

ing that Israel should reach out in loving concern to all people. Ezra and Nehemiah took the opposite position. They argued that Israel's role was to maintain her purity, to guard against influence from a Gentile world.

The same difference of opinion exists today about the role of the Church. Is the primary goal of Christian folk to huddle together in protected groups of like-minded people, or is it to reach out into a sinful world of need? Should the church gladly welcome anyone, or should restrictions be put up, so that to get in, a person must think and act just exactly as all others in the group do?

This dilemma has sometimes been described in terms from the early days of the American West. As a church, are we settlers, or are we pioneers? The settlers of the Old West established and organized themselves quickly, and settled in behind their town limits. Some strangers were welcomed; many were not. But safe communities were established.

In the late 1800s, Texas Christian University was moved from that wild, frontier railroad town, Fort Worth, thirty miles southwest to a small community called Thorpe Springs. Why? In pamphlets telling about the move, one overly confident supporter of TCU promised worried parents that TCU was now "thirty miles away from any known form of sin." Safely settled, indeed, until it was inevitably discovered that most people bring plenty of sin with them, and back to Fort Worth the college finally moved. It was the settler strategy. But the pioneers in the West fought against settling down. They kept pushing on and opening new territories, never stopping to build walls.

Which is the role of the Church today? Let it be said that there is a vitality in the exclusive, wall-building approach to religion. In his book *Why Conservative Churches Are Growing*, Dean Kelley offers clear proof that exclusive, wall-building churches usually tend, in the first generation at least, to be dynamic and growing. There is a vitality in exclusiveness. It is one dynamic of the fraternity-sorority system in colleges. Experts say that if such groups were open to everyone, they would quickly die away. But the fact that many cannot get in is an attraction to others. Certain religious groups go through procedures to admit candidates only after long consideration and careful initiation, and this becomes an attraction for many persons. It feels good to be in a group that is restricted in membership. Whether that is good or bad is quite another matter. It is, nonetheless, a fact, and it explains in part the vitality of religious groups that guard carefully their membership and build walls around them.

Now what is wrong with Ezra and Nehemiah's wall-building strategy? What is wrong with wanting to be in a Jerusalem or in a church made up only of people who think just like *you* do, one in which other ideas and other types

of people are simply not accepted? There are arguments *against* such a strategy for religion. What are they?

Start with a very practical objection. *Wouldn't it be boring, really, to be surrounded constantly by people who think and act just like you do, like I do?* A whole church full of people who like exactly the same hymns, the same kind of sermons, who have no differences of opinion about the National Council of Churches or the role of religion in politics? A church containing no differing opinions about the nature of God or the explanation of miracles or the role of evolution? It would be something like marrying a spouse who thinks just like we do, votes just like we do, likes the same music as we do, the same restaurants, the same authors, the same TV shows, the same Super Bowl team, the same everything! Fortunately, most of us do not marry such a spouse, and those differences in outlook become the seasoning of life.

There was once a woman whose dog had puppies. As a result of the chaos and mess the puppies caused, the woman's husband became irate because her efforts to give them away or sell them weren't working. The husband put his foot down and gave an ultimatum: "You advertise and get rid of those puppies. Either they go or I go." As a result, the woman's ad appeared in the newspaper. It said, "My husband says either he goes or puppies go. Puppies are adorable, fat, pedigreed. Husband is rude, fat, mixed breed. Take your pick."

Our hypothetical situation is this: If you had the chance to take your pick, would you choose only like-minded persons to be in your community of faith? It might be safe to do so, but along with the security would go a lot of monotony and boredom.

A second objection to sealing the church in behind a wall of sameness and carefully controlled orthodoxy is this: walling in always leads to more trouble. Nehemiah finished his wall around Jerusalem and they were safe. But no sooner had this task been completed than dissension broke out *inside* the city. "Now there arose a great outcry of the people and of their wives against their Jewish brethren." (Nehemiah 5:1) And inevitably, having built walls around the city, Nehemiah had to hire guards to protect the walls. (Nehemiah 7:3)

Walling in always leads to more trouble, as illustrated by the minister who returned to visit a church he had once served. He ran into Bill, who had been an elder and leader in the church, but who wasn't around anymore. "Bill, what happened? You used to be there every time the doors opened."

"Well, Pastor," said Bill, "a difference of opinion arose in the church. Some of us couldn't accept the decision and so we established a church of our own."

"Is that where you worship now?" asked the pastor.

"No," answered Bill, "we found that there, too, the people were not faithful, and a small group of us began meeting in a rented hall at night."

"Has that proven satisfactory?" asked the minister.

"No, I can't say that it has," Bill responded. "Satan was active even in that fellowship, so my wife and I withdrew and began to worship on Sunday at home by ourselves."

"Then at last you have found inner peace?" asked the pastor.

"No, I'm afraid we haven't," said Bill. "Even my wife began to develop ideas that were not foursquare, so now she worships in the northeast corner of the living room, and I am in the southwest."

Be very sure of it. Once the habit of narrowing the circle is established, it grows, and soon our religion has room for no one but ourselves. Robert Frost once put it like this: "If one by one we counted people out For the least sin, it wouldn't take us long To get so we had no one left to live with. For to be social is to be forgiving."² Walling in always leads to suspicion and distrust and dissension.

But the most important objection to the strategy of Ezra and Nehemiah is that the church's job description entails removing walls, not building them. Sometimes we mistakenly assume that the mission of Jesus Christ was to show God's love for the Church. Not so. The Church was established as a tool to show God's love for the world. Nowhere does the Scripture say, "God so loved the Church that he gave his only begotten Son" It is, "God so loved the *world* that he gave his only begotten Son so that all who believe on him might not perish but have eternal life." (John 3:16, paraphrase) Jesus' last words to his disciples were, "Go into all the world and preach the gospel to the whole creation." (Mark 16:15) "You are the salt of the earth; . . ." he said. "You are the light of the world." (Matthew 5:13,14) That is the role of the Church, never to shut itself in behind closed doors, but to reach out to a world of need. Dag Hammarskjöld once expressed this truth by saying that in our era, the road to holiness necessarily passes through the world of action.

If your church or your circle of friends is made up of nothing but conservatives or liberals, nothing but whites or blacks, nothing but what *you* are, then it is less than it should be. If it closes itself behind comfortable walls and is nervous about reaching out into the world and trying something different, then its life is apt to be monotone and spiritless.

Remember that story that captured the attention of our nation? A boy named David lived in Houston in an absolutely safe environment. For David there were no germs, no viruses, no pollution. Because of a severe immune deficiency, David lived much of his life in a sterile plastic bubble, first at the hospital, then at home. He was, in a sense, absolutely safe behind those plastic walls. But how that young boy yearned for danger. He said that he wanted

above all to go barefooted out in the grass. He never was in danger of falling out of a tree, but he never had the thrill of climbing one. He never stumbled, but he never ran. And until his death, he never reached that goal of walking barefooted outside.

A risk always comes with living out in the world, but it is the Church's calling, and the Christian's calling. Ezra and Nehemiah built the walls and said, "Come out of the world and get within the walls." But how quickly the most carefully built walls become a prison of the mind and spirit. So Jesus tore the walls down and said, "Go out into the world, as salt, as light, as leaven."

All of us as individuals and as a church will find that it is worth taking a risk or two in order to find vitality and life. Surely it was God himself who inspired the poet to express the truth for us: "Before I built a wall I'd ask to know what I was walling in, or walling out Something there is that doesn't love a wall, that wants it down."³

Study Questions

1. From your church experiences in the past, name some of the favorite people you would want to include in your ideal church. Can you recall any you would want to exclude? Why?
2. Do you think Ezra and Nehemiah's exclusive policies were necessary for the survival of the Jewish faith?
3. Paul once said, "Do not be mismated with unbelievers." (II Corinthians 6:14) How does this apply to Ezra-Nehemiah and to us today?
4. We are told to be "in the world but not of the world." Can you think of some examples in your daily life where this is put to the test?
5. Would you say that your church (or denomination) is best described as "settlers" or as "pioneers"?
6. "A person is known by the company he/she keeps." If that is true, how is it that Jesus associated frequently with "winebibbers and sinners"? Does your church specialize in righteous people, or in sinners?

"My beloved speaks and says to me: 'Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away; for lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone . . . Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.'" Song of Solomon 2:10-13

"Then the Lord God said, 'It is not good that the man should be alone; I will make him a helper fit for him.' . . . Therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and cleaves to his wife, and they become one flesh." Genesis 2:18,24

"Three things are too wonderful for me; four I do not understand: the way of an eagle in the sky, the way of a serpent on a rock, the way of a ship on the high seas, and the way of a man with a maiden." Proverbs 30:18-19

The Song of Solomon: Would You Include This Book?

"What is *this* book doing in the Bible?" There was real puzzlement, almost anger, in his eyes as he asked the question. "Which book?" I asked.

"The Song of Solomon," he answered. "Why is it in the Bible?"

He was a fellow who, in his middle years, had developed a serious interest in the Bible and God's reach for his people. Consequently, he had put aside all his books *about* the Bible and had started reading the Bible itself. He had read Matthew, one of the four Gospels. He had read one of Paul's letters and some of the stories in Genesis. He had read the fiery sermons of the prophet Amos. He even knew a Psalm or two by heart.

But now he had stumbled onto the Song of Solomon, and he was reacting like a gourmet cook who found Hamburger Helper among his herbs and spices. "Look at it," he said. "Have you read it? What is *this* book doing in my Bible, anyway?"

Why was he upset? What did he find there that created such frustration? Maybe it's what he didn't find that attracted his attention first. Did he find anything there about Israel's history? No, nothing. Any prophetic sermons about injustice and righteousness? No, not a one. Maybe something about worship or prayer, or giving? No, not a word about any of this. Then something about God, about the Messiah to come? No, these subjects were totally ignored.

As a matter of fact, the word *God* doesn't even occur in the book, nor the word *Lord*. *Pray* doesn't occur there, nor does *prayer* or *obedience*. The word *faith* cannot be found in the book, nor can *salvation* or *heaven* or *hell*.

For goodness' sake, if this book doesn't even mention God or faith or worship or salvation, what *does* it mention? What is it about? Here's a clue. The verb *love* occurs thirty-five times in the book, the word *beloved* twenty-nine times. Adjectives like *beautiful* and *fair* and *lovely* occur sixteen times. The word *bride* occurs six times, and the word *kiss* four times. Does that begin to tell you what the Song of Solomon is all about?

Then why is this book set amidst Ecclesiastes and Isaiah and Job, with their somber subjects? It seems as out of place as Joan Rivers at a convention of nuns. No wonder my friend came, asking angrily, "What is *this* book doing in the Bible?" After I assured him that *I* had nothing to do with it being there, we went on to talk about the Bible and the way some books were included and some excluded when the Bible was put together. We ended by asking ourselves, "If *we* had been making the selections, would *we* have included the Song of Solomon in the Bible?" Would *you* have included it?

First, take a look at the book itself and its remarkable history. What does it contain? It is only eight chapters long, was written in Hebrew, and is printed in a form that quickly shows that it is poetry. More than this, it is love poetry. Some of it may have been written by Solomon in 950 B.C., some of it perhaps to Solomon. Some of it seems to be much later, perhaps as late as 300 years before Christ.

Whoever wrote it composed some of the most lyrical, soaring passages of romantic poetry that can be found in any language or literature. Listen to some typical passages. This is from the second chapter of the book:

Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away;
For lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone.
The flowers appear on the earth, the time of singing has come,
And the voice of the turtledove is heard in our land.
The fig tree puts forth its figs, and the vines are in blossom--
they give forth fragrance.
Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.
(Song of Solomon 2:10-13)

What a beautiful picture this is of the springtime, when a young man's fancy turns to thoughts of what the girls have been thinking of all winter long--the beauty of love in springtime.

And here are other passages:

Behold, you are beautiful, my love, behold you are beautiful! (Song of Solomon 4:1)

You have ravished my heart, my sister, my bride, you have ravished my heart with a glance of your eyes. (Song of Solomon 4:9)

He brought me to the banqueting house, and his banner over me was love. Sustain me with raisins, refresh me with apples; for I am sick with love. (Song of Solomon 2:4-5)

No wonder then, expecting sermons and God-talk, that my friend read the Song of Solomon and came to me with the question, "What is *this* book doing in the Bible?"

Well, *how* did it get into the Old Testament? The answer is that it got in by the skin of its teeth. At a Jewish Council in the year A.D. 90, the rabbis decided once and for all which of the many popular books of their day should be included as Holy Writ. Did it ever occur to us that someone had to decide which books belonged in the Bible? By the year A.D. 90, the books of law and history and prophecy were pretty well set, but there were many other miscellaneous books very popular among the people. Which of them would be included in the Old Testament?

Because the Song of Solomon was so popular, many wanted it included. But because its content was so different from other biblical books, many rabbis opposed it. Include a book of love poetry in the Bible? Never! But by a very narrow margin, the book was voted in, and it took some clever reasoning to get it through. Its supporters interpreted it as an allegory. "This book is all right," they said. "Although it may seem so, it is not really about the love of a man for a maid. It is an allegory of God's love for his people Israel." Remarkably, this interpretation carried the day, and the Song of Solomon was accepted. Later Christian scholars approved it because it was, they reasoned, an allegory depicting Christ's love for the Church. The Church, after all, is sometimes called the "bride of Christ."

You see the irony here? The rabbis and the Christian scholars were able to accept it only by holding that it did not mean what it said! It meant something else! Now suppose you had been one of those ancient persons making the choice: would you have included this book? And if so, would you have had to interpret it as meaning something *other than what it says*? It is a dangerous practice, when reading Scripture, to deal with some passage we don't like simply by saying, "This does not mean what it says. What it means is . . .," and escaping by a side door of interpretation.

Jesus once said that it was easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to enter the Kingdom of Heaven. Most of us don't like that, so we interpret it away. "What Jesus *meant* was . . .," and soon we

have rich men flooding into heaven. *But what if he meant what he said?* Some students once asked Robert Frost what he meant by that lovely line in his poem, "The woods are lovely, dark and deep . . ."⁴ Did the woods, dark and deep, signify death, or meaninglessness? No, said Frost, all they meant were woods on a snowy evening. The woods were lovely. They were dark. They were deep. Maybe the Song of Solomon means just what it says!

But look where this leaves us! It leaves us with the notion that God, in his infinite wisdom, chose to put right in the middle of the Bible a collection of poems that glorify the gift of physical, romantic love between men and women. Right next to prophetic sermons and moving psalms and ponderous history, he would have us read and think about the springtime with its familiar feelings between a man and a woman. Is it possible that God wants us to understand this book as meaning just what it says?

It is not only possible, but perfectly reasonable, when we remember that loneliness was the first thing God ever declared bad. Remember those creation stories in Genesis? God created the heavens and the earth, and the Scripture says God saw that it was good. He created the heavenly bodies and the creatures of the sea, and he saw that they were good. Step by step the creative order came, and each time, God saw that it was good. Then he created man: "Then the Lord God said, 'It is *not good* that the man should be alone . . .'" (Genesis 2:18, emphasis added)

The earth--good! The heavens--good! The creatures of the sea--good! Aloneness--not good! Therefore, God made woman, ". . . and the man said, 'This at last is bone of my bones and flesh of my flesh' And therefore a man leaves his father and his mother and clings to his wife, and they become one flesh." (Genesis 2:23-24, paraphrase)

In the earlier story of creation, it is put even more simply: "So God created man in his own image, . . . male and female he created them. And God blessed them, and God said to them, 'Be fruitful and multiply . . .,' And God saw everything that he had made, and behold, it was very good" (Genesis 1:27-28, 31)

The first thing God ever declared bad was loneliness. And in order to break down that loneliness, he made us male and female, and declared it good. Entirely fitting, then, that a book of the Bible should celebrate this. The romantic, physical relationship between men and women is not something to be scribbled on lavatory walls; it is inscribed in the pages of Scripture. "It is not good that the man should be alone . . . male and female he created them . . . bone of my bones, flesh of my flesh . . . be fruitful and multiply . . . and God saw that it was very good." So, "arise, my love, my fair one, and come away, for lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone."

What does it say about us if we feel obliged to interpret away the obvious meaning of the Song of Solomon? It says what we all know: we still have deep-set feelings of anxiety and guilt about this gift from God, the physical relationship between the sexes. And with good reason! It is so easy to profane or misuse any holy gift. We know how frequently we twist and warp and misuse this gift to our own purposes. We know how often the words "I love you" can mean "I love myself and I want you!"

But just because we misuse a holy gift does not mean that we stop calling it holy or that we refuse to celebrate it. The Song of Solomon celebrates this gift with lyrical, unabashed joy and encourages us to do the same. We lose something vital to ourselves if we assign the gift of romantic love to the shadowy, hidden side of life. The relationship between men and women is God's first way of destroying loneliness.

Most of us need that. We are constantly struggling to break through the smog of loneliness, to identify with others. That explains, I think, the feeling of utter euphoria that comes upon a city when its team wins the World Series or the Superbowl. Just for a moment, we all belong to one another, we are all one, and it's not just that *I* am glad, but that everyone at the restaurant, in the shop, at the store, every house, every block, every horn-honking car is glad, too. These are rare moments of lowering the barriers of aloneness.

But falling in love promises that feeling for a lifetime. *Never again will we be lonely!* Most of us know that love cannot burn on maximum voltage continually, and that what we build on it becomes most important. But the original feeling breaks down those high barriers we have put around ourselves and has us singing, "Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away" with me.

Scott Peck points out that it leads also to a survival of the species, and this is an intrinsic part of that gift. "Falling in love," he said, "is a trick that our genes pull on our otherwise perceptive mind to hoodwink or trap us into marriage."⁵ But more important, this gift of God offers at least the first step in doing away with our ancient lostness and aloneness, our feeling of always being "a stranger and afraid in a world we never made." The success of a marriage usually depends at least in part on the ability of the partners to keep those barriers down, to remain open and present to one another. It is one of the primary functions of marriage: *don't let your spouse be lonely!* Find ways to keep on saying, "Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away." The urge to do so is a gift from God.

Jesus himself affirmed it when they asked him about marriage. "Have you not read that he who made them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'For this reason a man shall leave his father and mother and be joined to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? . . . What there-

fore God has joined together, let not man put asunder." (Matthew 19:4-6) In that Old Testament book, the one *they almost left out*, we celebrate that gift of love.

Study Questions

1. Were you aware of how the books of the Bible were selected? Does knowledge of this process lessen your reverence for God's Word? Why? Why not?
2. If God declared the act of procreation good, why has it so often come to arouse shame in us?
3. What is the role of parents in helping children see that sex is a gift from God? What mistakes do parents often make in this effort?
4. Why, after we are married for a time, do husbands and wives stop being "romantic" with one another?
5. Someone has suggested that if we treated our mates during courtship the way we treat them after years of marriage, we would never get married. What point is this person making? Do you agree?
6. Are you willing to interpret the Song of Solomon literally?

"In the year that King Uzziah died I saw the Lord sitting upon a throne And I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send, and who will go for us?' Then I said, 'Here am I! Send me.'" Isaiah 6:1,8

"Ah, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, offspring of evildoers, sons who deal corruptly! They have forsaken the Lord, they have despised the Holy One of Israel, they are utterly estranged." Isaiah 1:4

"Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for her sins." Isaiah 40:1-2

Isaiah: Judgment and Love

He came into church with a swagger, Bob did. Though a Christian, he was basically a genial scoundrel. He was honest when it was noticeable and profitable, faithful to his marriage when no other opportunities presented themselves, harsh to his employees, bigoted and unloving toward anyone different from himself. But now he came to worship, feeling that if God needed his spirits lifted, Bob would cheer him up by being in church. So Bob was there, sitting proudly, waiting. And what word from God did Bob need to hear?

Bill was seated two rows back. He had stumbled into church bruised and hurting. Life had suddenly tumbled in on him. The old routines he had settled into had been disrupted by loss of a job. Some people he had thought would always be a part of his life now had other plans. With so many old certainties now gone, Bill came raw and wounded to worship. Two rows behind Bob, he sat waiting. What word from God did *Bill* need to hear?

Clearly, one needed judgment and one needed comfort, and the difficulty of planning one worship service that fits both is quickly seen. On the usual Sunday, when you come to church, which of the two do you want your church to emphasize--judgment or love?

Some churches very intentionally specialize in one or the other. Some time ago, I had the unusual opportunity of being in front of a television set on Sunday morning, and I watched the religious services. I saw a half-dozen churches and their preachers, and I saw no balance between judgment and

comfort. Apparently, to sustain the viewers and earn the huge financial support that must come, the television preachers must concentrate on and emphasize one extreme or the other--fiery judgment or happy promise.

On one hand, there were the "ain't-it-awful" preachers, those whose specialty was harsh judgment. Glares and frowns and grimaces and shaken fists and fear came pouring from the television set, all over the living-room floor. I heard all about the evils that are overcoming us, adultery and drinking and homosexuality and liberalism and pornography and Communism and mainline preachers--all mixed and blended into one gigantic frenzy. Judgment is coming, so get ready for it!

On the other hand, there were the "ain't-it-wonderful" people. Smiles had replaced frowns; loving gestures had replaced shaken fists. It's a wonderful, wonderful world we live in, one in which all you have to do is think of the possibilities and you can attain them. Something wonderful is going to happen to you today. God's in his heaven, and he wants you to be blessed, to be wealthy. Don't think negative thoughts. Concentrate on the positives of life. After all, "God loves you," the preacher will say, "and so do I!" Life can be wonderful.

Now which of these do you come to church needing most today? The trouble is that in almost every worship service, both Bob with his pride and Bill with his pain are present. We need both judgment *and* comfort, and there is one biblical book that includes both, the book of the prophet Isaiah in the Old Testament.

Isaiah is the longest prophetic book, sixty-six chapters long. The first half contains fierce judgment and the second half contains tender mercy. How can that be? Many scholars say that the reason the book of Isaiah is so long and its two halves so different is that it is really two prophetic books that have been joined together. There was a "First Isaiah," whose specialty was judgment, and a "Second Isaiah," whose specialty was love.

The first Isaiah lived about 750 B.C., when judgment was what God's people needed most to hear. In those days, Israel was a proud and unrighteous nation, and through this prophet Isaiah, God sent words like these:

Isaiah 1:4 - "Ah, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, offspring of evildoers, . . . They have forsaken the Lord, . . . They are utterly estranged."

Isaiah 1:21,23-25 - "How the faithful city has become a harlot, she that was full of justice! Righteousness lodged in her, but now murderers . . . Every one loves a bribe and runs after gifts. They do not defend the fatherless, and the widows' cause does not come to them. Therefore the

Lord says, . . . 'Ah, I will vent my wrath on my enemies, . . . and I will turn my hand against you'"

Isaiah 5:25 - "Therefore the anger of the Lord was kindled against his people, and he stretched out his hand against them and smote them, and the mountains quaked; and their corpses were as refuse in the midst of the streets."

This was the message the people needed to hear. It minced no words in identifying evil for what it was. It was a message of harsh, ringing judgment.

But with the sound of these condemning words still echoing, look at chapter forty of the same book, and suddenly, it is a new prophetic message we encounter. The same God is speaking; the same nation Israel is listening. But now it is 550 B.C., and Israel is in exile in Babylon, bruised and hurt, sick with fear and distress. Now the prophetic voice changes tone, and this is the word we hear from this later Isaiah:

Isaiah 40:1-2 - "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her warfare is ended, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins."

Isaiah 40:11 - "He will feed his flock like a shepherd, he will gather the lambs in his arms, he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young."

Isaiah 40:31 - "But they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint."

In one prophetic book, spread out over two centuries, both judgment *and* love are found, for both are part of God's word to us. But both cannot be presented effectively in the same sermon. On a given Sunday, either Bob, needing judgment, or Bill, needing comfort, will go away largely unsatisfied. We can only hope that we attend our churches with regularity, and that our churches will offer us a balanced diet of judgment and love, for we need them both.

It is clear that we need judgment. We need iron in our diet, the hard, clear demands of righteous living. No matter how sophisticated we get in our thinking, no matter how liberated we become in our personal lives, certain things are wrong. They have always been wrong, they are wrong now, they will continue to be wrong, and the church needs to have the courage to say it.

Adultery is wrong, whatever the domestic situation and whomever the cast. It is an offense against God and all that we know to be good. Greed is wrong. Making an idol out of money is wrong. Prejudice is wrong. Pride is wrong. Hatred is wrong. No matter how cleverly we can debate the issues, the opponent in that debate is God, and we are not going to win the point. Some things are clearly wrong, and you and I need to have the courage to say it and to listen to it said.

In our preschools, some of the rooms have one-way glass through which unobserved parents can watch their children at play. As long as the watchful parents remain silent, the children play quite naturally, with the usual number of stolen blocks and shoves and scratches. But let the parents clear their throats or cough, and the children suddenly know someone is there beyond the glass watching, and they stop acting naturally and mold their activities to fit whomever they think is there. When we come to church, we ought to hear God clearing his throat, reminding us that as his children, there are standards of integrity to which we are called.

Our tendency is to want to hear fiery sermons about the sins that are prevalent among other people. The best of us are not immune to this. With the highest of motives, ecumenical groups in the United States regularly call for an end to the awful practice of apartheid in South Africa. Such groups consistently ignore the unhappy fact that 95 percent of the Protestant congregations in our own country are, every Sunday morning, fifty-two weeks a year, 100 percent racially segregated. Officially enforced apartheid, way off yonder, is easier to deal with than *de facto* apartheid, right here where we worship.

We tend to want to hear judgment of other people, but we grow offended when *we* are the targets. Nonetheless, when we worship on Sunday, we comfortable people need to be afflicted with a clear reminder that we never grow clever enough to escape God's command that we be righteous people, and that some things are wrong. In Isaiah's words, "Ah, sinful nation, a people laden with iniquity, offspring of evildoers, . . . they have forsaken the Lord." (Isaiah 1:4) Sometimes we need to hear that said, loud and clear.

But oh, we need tenderness, too. Life with its conveniences becomes so easy for us that we forget what hard battles we fight within. We can never own enough VCRs and compact discs and stereos and computerized cars and stocks and bonds to drown out the muffled cries of frustration and anxiety that come from within. Like Bill, we come to church dressed so well that no one can see the bruise marks on the spirit. Everyone, spouse and parent and boss, has already told us how inadequate and miserable we are; we don't need more of that from the church. We come needing to be lifted up instead of knocked down.

And that needs to happen in church. Again, let Isaiah tell that message we need to hear, we yearn to hear: "Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and tell her that her warfare is ended" (Isaiah 40:1, paraphrase) "But they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength, they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary, they shall walk and not faint." (Isaiah 40:31)

"Mount up with wings like eagles!" I like that, and it is needed. What hard battles we do face. How hard it is to hold on. How burdensome life becomes. One of my heroes in recent years was that intrepid fellow from California who attached a bunch of helium-filled balloons onto his aluminum lawn chair, strapped himself in, and cast off. Up more than 5,000 feet he went into the California sky, causing a 747 pilot to radio to the tower, "You'll never believe what we just passed!" But in a fanciful sort of way, that ought to happen, and I know it does happen, right here in church. As we share in worship, someone who has been mired in despair suddenly is loosed from the surly bonds of earth, and the spirit soars. Then someone is lifted up and touches the face of God, right here in church on Sunday. How important it is that we permit that to happen when we worship, how critically important that we know how to speak tenderly to the wounded of this world.

Several years ago, a week before Christmas, the phone rang toward the end of a busy day. I was home, awaiting my college kids' arrival for the holidays, but the distraught man who was calling wanted to see me. "Tomorrow?" I said.

"No, today, right now."

"Well, you see," I said, "my children are coming in from Fort Worth."

Then he said, "My wife is dead. She took her own life, and I've got to see you."

Ashamed of my busyness, I went at once. They sat there stunned, four children, the youngest seven, another twelve. The Christmas tree was up, packages under it. I didn't know them very well. I had heard rumors of problems, but that was it. They had been trying, he said. In fact, just the Sunday before, they were all in church, all six of them, way up in the balcony. It hit me hard: Four days earlier, she had heard my sermon, had listened to my prayers, and had gone out from there to collect the cold paraphernalia necessary for a releasing death.

I know enough about mental illness to know that probably nothing I could have said would have averted that tragedy. Probably. Nonetheless, I confess to you that so frequently as the last notes of the pre-sermon hymn begin to die away, I look out at the congregation full of faces known, and faces quite unknown to me, and I wonder if she's there again. And I want God's Spirit to help me find ways to speak tenderly, and to say to her and to so many others,

"Don't be afraid. Please don't give up. Hold on. Keep trying, one more week. We are in God's good hands, and Jesus Christ is with us."

Judgment *and* love. God offers both, so if it is clear, ringing judgment you need, take it, and be cleansed by it and directed toward a better life. But end with love, and you will be lifted up on wings like eagles; you will run and not be weary; you will walk, and not faint!

Study Questions

1. Which kind of sermon do you like best--a fiery sermon naming our sins, or a gentle sermon witnessing to God's love? Why is it that judgmental sermons usually draw larger crowds?

2. Is it more important that the sermon gives the people what they want, or what they need?

3. Name the topics you enjoy most in sermons. Which topics do you wish the preacher would avoid?

4. Do you agree that our present book of Isaiah may be a collection of the work of two different prophets set in two different centuries? Does this pose any problems for you?

5. Do you approve of your denomination issuing resolutions which take stands on extremely controversial issues of the day? Why? Why not?

6. Can you think of persons who today need you to "speak tenderly, and tell them that their warfare has ended"? Can you think of someone who needs a word of ringing judgment from you? Which is easier?

"How lonely sits the city that was full of people! How like a widow she has become, she that was great among the nations! . . . She weeps bitterly in the night, tears on her cheeks . . ." Lamentations 1:1-2

"But this I call to mind, and therefore I have hope: The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is thy faithfulness." Lamentations 3:21-23

"Not that I complain of want; for I have learned, in whatever state I am, to be content. I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound; in any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and want. I can do all things in him who strengthens me." Philippians 4:11-13

6

Lamentations: The Survivors

We are all survivors! It always intrigues me that most of us do not recognize this. We are *all* survivors. Most of us have the feeling that our situation is unique. Somehow the bouncing ball of misfortune picked our slot alone to fall in. We won the wrong lottery. Now, all the others watch from their serene and happy states, while we are chosen to suffer. But as years pass, I see it more clearly. All of us are survivors of events we would never have chosen for ourselves, victims of hurt and pain, some of it undoubtedly earned, some of it undeserved. Most of us hide our scars and bruises so well that others never see them, but the marks are there. Rich and poor, clever and dull, male and female, old and young, we share the fact that we are all survivors.

I remember years ago coming in from work one day, slumping down on the sofa beside our first-grader of that particular year. He had his reader in his lap with all those complicated stories of Dick and Jane and Spot. He said with a sigh, "Boy, if I could just get this chapter done, there would be a lot of pressure off me." And I laughed! Out loud! Pressure on a first-grader? His look of utter surprise when I laughed pulled me out of that incredibly self-centered moment and reminded me that six-year-olds are survivors, too. I put an arm around him and together we finished the chapter, and some of the pressure was removed from both of us.

What is it you are trying to survive right now? For some of us, the catastrophe to be survived is obvious. Someone died. Someone rejected us. Someone betrayed us. The business failed. The doctor's report was bad. For

others, the enemy is invisible, or at best, shadowy. The battles go on silently, and no one sees the conflict, no one hears the silent screams inside us. We are disappointed with life, boxed into a corner, filled with a sense of uselessness. We are frustrated and surprisingly angry so much of the time. In some way, we have come out second best with life, and now we are trying to survive. Our own private pain often prevents us from seeing others' torment, so we say it clearly: all of us, *all of us*, are survivors.

One day, about 2,500 years ago, a survivor sat down and let his feelings of despair flow freely onto written pages. Those pages became an obscure little book of the Old Testament, and its title describes its contents: Lamentations!

What brought it about? In 586 B.C., the holy city of Jerusalem was utterly destroyed by the invading Babylonians. Down came the temple of Israel. Not a stone was left standing. In utter defeat, utter destruction, and away into exile in Babylon went the leading people of Jerusalem. There, the Scripture says, "They hung their harps on the willow trees and wept by the waters of Babylon." (Psalm 137:1-2, paraphrase) Tradition says that Lamentations was written by Jeremiah, the gloomy prophet. (II Chronicles 35:25) Therefore, in the Bible, it is placed immediately following Jeremiah. This short book of five chapters contains poetry that pictures in a remarkably modern way how we all respond to tragedy.

Just as we often do, the author exaggerates how good life used to be before misfortune came upon them, and he is unable to see reasons for joy that still exist. (Lamentations 4) He holds an unrealistic wish that everything could be restored just exactly as it was before. (Lamentations 5:21) Although the book reads like a dirge, all through it are little statements of hope and insight.

There are lessons to be learned from this misfortune, the author says. (Lamentations 3:40) He admits that his people brought much of this present misery upon themselves. (Lamentations 1:18) Moreover, God's ways are mysterious and hard to understand. (Lamentations 2, 3:32-33) And what survivors need most of all, he says, is patience to endure and live through these years. (Lamentations 3:21-26)

Across 2,500 years, then, this book reaches out to all of us who are struggling to survive the fall of some personal holy city. Living our lives of quiet desperation, we find ourselves passing through the same stages as this ancient writer who has suffered much, but who wants to believe and to trust again.

What are those stages through which any of us must pass in order to survive?

The first is shock. The Israelites could not believe that Jerusalem had fallen. Their minds simply could not accept the fact that the temple, this holy dwelling of God built by Solomon 300 years before, was destroyed. Move for-

ward in time to our day. We cannot believe that our spouse has died. We cannot believe the business has failed, the marriage has ended, the child is in trouble, the accident happened. Shock is a time when there is a chasm between the mind and the emotions. If utter reason takes over, we bury the grief and act as if all were well, and those strong feelings eventually come out in unexpected ways. If emotion takes over completely, we are apt to collapse and find ourselves unable to cope with life.

The immediate response to any Jerusalem's falling is sure to be shock, utter disbelief, and it is a time to try to get mind and heart back together again.

The second stage is suffering, and it brings anger and depression all mixed together. Both are clearly present in Lamentations. There may be a Promised Land beyond this wilderness, but it remains a wilderness, and it is no fun! Whose fault is all this? In our suffering, we strike out and assess blame for our predicament.

1) We blame God. "He caused my strength to fail," says our writer. ". . . The Lord gave me into the hands of those whom I cannot withstand." (Lamentations 1:14) Rare is the person who can experience misfortune and great pain without eventually tracing it back to God.

2) We blame others, as well, and usually the greater our depression and anger, the more likely we are to implicate those closest to us. Depression works best with an audience. Modern Jewish writers often stereotype the Jewish mother as one who suffers through all the misfortunes in life, laying guilt on everyone around her. When her family is around, all she portrays is despair. Left alone, she manages to function just fine. Depression usually looks for a target, someone on whom to blame the disappointments of life. And our writer found just those enemies on whom to cast the blame, the ones whose taunts made the situation so much worse. (Lamentations 1:21,3:14-20). If we consider ourselves survivors right now, struggling to endure, it might serve us well to try to see whom it is we are blaming, who is the unfortunate target of our suffering. Some survivors are determined that their friends and families suffer as much as they do.

If the first stage is shock, and the second is suffering, *the third and final one is recovery*. This implies both understanding and acceptance of what has happened to us. It does not mean that we like what has happened, only that we learn to accept it. Most of us find recovery speeded up when we take certain helpful steps.

1) The first is to express our feelings of despair openly and without holding back. It *is* a tragedy. The city *has* fallen. The accident *did* happen. It deserves grief, and it is healthy for us to express it in tears and in words. This is why it is good that Lamentations is a part of our Bible. It gives us a pattern

for verbalizing our feelings, draining them off. This can be done in prayer before God, where absolute frankness is called for. It can be done before some carefully selected friend. The old folk wisdom says, "Show your wounds only to a healer." Some well-intentioned friends multiply our despair rather than divide it. But express those feelings, and let them out.

2) The second step flows out of this honest expression of our despair. We slowly move from "if only" to "what now?" "If only Jerusalem had not fallen!" "If only they had not destroyed the temple!" "If only I hadn't taken that job!" "If only she hadn't left me." But all the "if onlys" in the world cannot restore the past. "Oh Lord," says our writer, ". . . renew the past as of old." (Lamentations 5:21, paraphrase) But that won't happen. It can't happen. In Wordsworth's famous line, ". . . Nothing can bring back the hour of splendour in the grass, of glory in the flower."⁶ It's gone! Jerusalem may be rebuilt, but it won't ever be the same as before.

Then don't give the past permission to enslave you! Psychiatrist Albert Adler used to tell of the group of people in wartime crowded together in a subway station during a bombing raid, trying to sleep on the floor. All night, one woman kept them awake by continually crying out, "Oh God, I'm so thirsty! Oh God, I'm so thirsty!" After hours of this, someone brought her a glass of water. She drank it, and quietness settled on the group. Then, after a few moments had passed, they heard the same woman crying out, "Oh God, how thirsty I was!"

Don't let miserable remembering become a habit. Don't get comfortable with the wilderness. As quickly as you can, move from "if only" to "what now?"

3) And finally, never forget who wins the final battle. Even amid the rubble of the fallen city, our writer remembers it. "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases, his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning . . ." (Lamentations 3:22-23) Whatever you are trying to survive and live through, remember that! The steadfast love of God is new every morning.

How often I recall an incident of several years back. I suppose because I grew up on a farm where the weather was so important, the coming of spring storms has always fascinated me, and I love the boom of thunder and the flash of lightning. Around our house when the rumble of thunder is heard, someone will nearly always make the statement, "I like thunder," partly for reassurance, and partly to mimic what the father of the family often says.

It was an evening in spring, and I was sitting in semi-darkness in the back yard at twilight, watching a cloud coming up from the northwest, watching as the lightning danced in sheets and streaks across the distant sky, listening to the different sounds the thunder made as the storm grew closer. The winds were picking up steadily in the trees, and the darkness was deepening. But then in the twilight, as the storm gathered, my three-year-old perplexedly

noticed me sitting out there in the backyard, and disregarding his built-in fear of the storm, he dashed out to where I was sitting and climbed onto my lap, sitting rather anxiously for a moment watching the storm come.

How awesome an electrical storm must be to a child. As one particularly vicious streak of lightning introduced a deafening burst of sharp thunder, he looked fearfully up at me and said, "I like thunder," and with a little shiver, settled himself back into my lap and drew my arms about him, as the wind became chill around us.

But how strongly at that moment the thought came to me: surely this is the essence of the gospel, for as that child in that moment was to me, so am I ever to God. The sharp sting of the lightning and the terror of the thunder will play about me as long as I live, but I am in the hands of God, who loves me. So are you! And so, when the testing of life comes, we can feel that love. When the city falls, when the telegram arrives, when the doctor with grief in his eyes says that the report was bad, when the daughter with ashen face says, "Mother, I've got to talk to you," when the storm descends with all its force, God's arms are about us, and his love surrounds us.

For all us survivors, the old Scottish litany says it well: "I know I'm wounded, but not slain. I'll lay me down and bleed awhile, and then rise up, and fight again." May God bless all us survivors in our lying down--and in our rising up!

Study Questions

1. Are all of us really survivors? Why do some people hide their pain so well?
2. Do you tend to share your pain with others, or keep it to yourself? Which seems to be more helpful to you in dealing with pain?
3. As the years pass, do we tend to exaggerate the problems of the past, or to minimize them?
4. Does knowing that personal or national sin brought misfortune on ourselves help to deal with it?
5. Do you tend to find a convenient target on whom to assign blame when you are suffering?
6. Do you know someone who seems enslaved by some misfortune of the past? How can we avoid this?

"The word of the Lord that came to Joel, the son of Pethuel." Joel 1:1

"The threshing floors shall be full of grain, the vats shall overflow with wine and oil. I will restore to you the years which the swarming locust has eaten, the hopper, the destroyer, and the cutter, my great army, which I sent among you." Joel 2:24-25

"We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed; perplexed, but not driven to despair; persecuted, but not forsaken; struck down, but not destroyed." II Corinthians 4:8-9

Joel: The Years the Locusts Took Away

"If I could only have those years back again." He was remembering the catastrophe of his marriage and the years it had eaten up. Neither of them had given their best to it, and so much had been wasted. "If I could only have those years back!"

"If I could only do those four years over," he said. He was in his late twenties, remembering the wasteland of his college career. Four years wasted! Four years of fun and games he spent, not realizing that he was buying a ticket to the rest of his life. "If I could only have those years back!"

They sat remembering their two-week vacation, remembering with embarrassment and regret. "If we could only have that time back again!" Even as they had packed the car to leave, an ugly quarrel had broken out over something very unimportant. What remarkably bad timing for a quarrel it had been, and for the entire two weeks, anger had eaten up their vacation. Now, both the vacation and the quarrel were past, and they wished they could try it again.

He remembered those six years in his mid-thirties. His problem with alcohol had come to a head, and he wished he had those lost years back. So many plans, so many hopes and opportunities, so many friends were lost during that time, and now that he had long since conquered the problem, he wished he had those years back.

Most of us have lived through experiences that make us look back with longing on wasted days and opportunities, wishing that these things had never happened, wishing that we had those years over again. There is a strange little book in the Old Testament that looks back on a calamity the people lived through and yearns for a new beginning. The book is called Joel, and the calamity was not anger or war or resentment--it was an unbelievably destructive plague of locusts that came swarming in from the north, utterly devouring everything grown in the little nation of Israel.

Set about the year 350 B.C., the book contains the words of the prophet Joel, who describes in graphic detail the destruction and the misery brought by the locusts. So much was taken away, and the prophet describes both the extent of the loss they suffered and the relief they felt when the plague ended. And through it runs the unspoken plea of the people: "Give us back the years the locusts have taken away." (Joel 2:25, paraphrase)

I am extracting that verse and polishing it and framing it and hanging it on the walls of our minds, precisely because there are so many of us for whom it is appropriate. The awareness of past failure is always there. It may involve years, or it may involve a more limited span of time. But it involves failure, calamity, distress, and it evokes the spoken or unspoken cry, "Give us back the years the locusts have taken away."

The locusts nibble regularly on our lives today, make no mistake about it, and they take away so much. In what form do they come among us today?

What about the bitterness that many of us harbor over events in life that didn't turn out as we had hoped? If abject bitterness over some disappointment were visible as a large black spot on our foreheads, we would be a polka-dotted congregation, for it is a widespread plague, absorbing joy and hope and spirit in life. All the good things that keep happening are nibbled at and eaten up by bitterness, and the years pass in the process.

Do you know the story of a man named Hart Danks? He was a struggling songwriter in the 1870s. He and his wife starved, but struggled together. Then they hit it big. Danks wrote a musical tribute to his wife, and it sold and was sung everywhere. The song was called "Silver Threads Among the Gold." But the songwriter and his wife quarreled over the new money. They divorced, and rights to the song were lost in the process. Danks harbored that loss until his death years later. He never wrote another successful song, and at his death, they found beside him a faded copy of his popular song on which he had written, "It is hard to grow old alone." Bitterness! It affects so many and eats up the years, so that we are left with the cry, "Give us back the years the locusts have taken away!"

What about these grudges we carry so stubbornly with us wherever we go? Think how much good is devoured by them, how many ugly words and ac-

tions they breed. Unless put aside with forgiving kindness, grudges have a way of enveloping a life. Up in Lindsay, Ontario, a Mr. T.H. Stinson years ago willed sixty shares of Victoria & Grey Trust Company to his church. Annual dividends were to be used to buy Easter lilies each year. Since the original gift, the stock has split five times, and it is now Canada's third largest trust company. The dividends would literally fill the church with lilies all year long, and the trustees have had to redirect their use. Grudges grow just like that, dividing and expanding, unless they are deliberately and consciously checked. Until they are, people and opportunities and hopes and dreams are devoured, and so much is lost. "Give us back the years the locusts have taken away."

Name any of the other destructive emotions, and see how they will devour us if we keep feeding them. Anger, envy, greed, jealousy--all come sweeping in on us, eating up a wealth of time and opportunities. Amazing, that we who prize our freedom so much will so quickly become enslaved to some emotion that warps and twists us to its will. I like the way Dr. Robert Eliot makes us think about the prices we pay for our emotions. His book is on stress, and he titles it *Is It Worth Dying For?* He points out that we decide what emotional price we pay for our predicaments. Most of us overspend emotionally, and we do not need to. It is natural that circumstances will cause us to be angry at someone at times. Surely we will be sad at times. But how far do we go with those emotions? In his book, Dr. Eliot makes the point clearly. Why pay the price of hatred when a little dislike will do? Why pay the price of suicidal depression when a little sadness will do? It is when we overspend emotionally that life-threatening difficulties come, and we are left, finally, looking back and wishing for a new chance. "Give us back the years the locusts have taken away!"

For some of us this is a present reality. The locusts are here at our doors now, nibbling away. For others, it's a matter of looking back and getting smart too late, and seeing so much lost in the past. But the swarms descend on all of us, and the years are eaten up.

It is our natural desire to retrieve those years. We want another chance at them. Recently, Bernard Malamud's story *The Natural* was made into a movie starring Robert Redford. Malamud's story of a phenomenally gifted, but jinxed young ballplayer ends very unhappily. The movie producers supposed that the moviegoing public would be infuriated by the unhappy ending, so they simply changed Malamud's original ending, and made up a new and happy conclusion to the story, and that is how we saw it on the screen.

Would that it worked that way for us! Look back on the endings to those stories that have played out in *your* life. Think of the new ending you would

put on them if you had a chance. But it cannot be. Omar Khayyam's famous words describe our condition:

"The Moving Finger writes; and, having writ,
Moves on: nor all your Piety nor Wit
Shall lure it back to cancel half a Line,
Nor all your Tears wash out a Word of it."⁷

"Give us back those years!" And some of us never quit trying to restore them. From time to time, Clayton Moore comes through town doing radio interviews and pleading his case. Do you know Clayton Moore? For years, he wore a black mask and ran with a sidekick named Tonto. He was the Lone Ranger, and he reveled in those years. But he made the mistake of growing old, and the powers-that-be selected a younger Lone Ranger. When that happened, Clayton Moore refused to turn loose of his role, and kept on wearing his mask and promoting himself as the Lone Ranger. A civil suit followed, and Clayton lost it and had to turn in his mask and silver bullets. He now travels around wearing very mask-looking dark sunglasses, finding ways to keep pleading his case, yearning for the years the locusts took away.

But it cannot be. New endings cannot be written and imposed on past years. We cannot recall words we have spoken. We cannot erase actions we have done. We cannot restore wasted words and opportunities. The years cannot really be restored.

And yet, there in that little Old Testament book, the Word of God does come to Joel and say, "I will give back to you the years the locusts took away." (Joel 2:25, paraphrase)

How? That's what we want to know, those of us with locust-damaged lives. How? We know we cannot go back and change the moving finger's writing. The calamities, the missed opportunities, the mistakes of yesterday are gone and beyond our reach. Then how can we restore the years the locusts have taken away?

Underneath almost all the great cities of the Near East are ruins of older cities. The Jerusalem that flourishes today is built on the ruins of a half-dozen Jerusalems that the locusts took away. Underneath the present new Damascus is an old Damascus. And so it is with Tyre and Sidon and Amman. The broken walls of Jericho were used as raw material to build a new city.

We restore the wasted years, the locust-damaged years, by learning from them and then building on them. Most strong lives today are built on a foundation of pulverized mistakes and blunders and poor decisions and errors of judgment and pain. Lord Tennyson caught it exactly. Men and women, he said, ". . . rise on stepping-stones of their dead selves to higher things."⁸

Stepping stones of your dead selves! What does that mean for you? Maybe the years the locusts took away have to do with pain and sickness. Carson McCullers was one of our best-loved novelists in this country. In her twenties, she suffered a series of strokes that left her partially paralyzed. Her physical illness continued and even worsened. Her husband took his own life. She became virtually bedfast. Yet after all this, she wrote the novel *The Heart Is a Lonely Hunter*, the lyrical story of hope set in a racially torn South. Stepping stones of her dead self!

John Newton, surely one of the most wasted of young men, gave way in England to every habit that would cripple him, from sexual excesses to opium addiction to drunkenness. Gnawing at him from every side were these parasites that would take his life away. But there came a word from a friend, the intervention of a kindly old minister, and John Newton began to build something new on an old city, as he described it in the hymn that he finally wrote: "Amazing grace, how sweet the sound that saved a wretch like me. I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see." Stepping stones of his dead self!

Or what about that scrawny, sickly ten-year-old black boy from San Francisco? One of his burdens was his first name given to him by his family. It was Orenthal, and Orenthal Simpson fought many a battle over that. But a harder battle was fought against a condition called rickets, caused by undernourishment, a malady that weakened and bowed his legs. A lot of locusts for a small boy, and they took their toll. But someone supplied leg braces, and someone else supplied encouragement, and Orenthal supplied fierce determination. He ended up shortening his awkward first name and became the outstanding football player, O.J. Simpson. *We build on stepping stones of our dead selves.*

Unless you are most unusual, you can name them, these locusts that have devoured a part of your life. Maybe right now they are still there, and the whir of their wings sounds even now in your mind. But whatever else it may be, Christian faith is a faith of new beginnings. It is not too late to start over, clean and fresh, right now. Certainly they will come, these life-damaging plagues, but they move on, and with the help of Jesus Christ, we build new lives upon the ruins, and we rise to higher things.

It is a solemn promise of God, so claim it and use it and rejoice in it. "I will give you back the years the locusts have taken away!"

Study Questions

1. Can you think of periods in your life which the locusts carried away? What *were* the locusts?
2. Have there been such periods in your church's life?

3. Have there been times when you overspent emotionally and over-reacted to manageable problems?

4. "Things turn out best," someone has said, "for those who make the best of the way things turn out." What does this say about the years the locusts have taken away?

5. Did you find other verses in Joel that seemed to speak to you? What were they?

6. What prevents you right now from beginning to build on the ruins the past has left behind? Who would be most blessed if you did? A parent? Spouse? Friend?

"With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my first-born for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?" He has showed you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" Micah 6:6-8

"What does it profit, my brethren, if a man says he has faith but has not works? Can his faith save him? If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and filled,' without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead." James 2:14-17

Micah: The Heart of the Matter

Last winter, the principal of the Longview Christian Academy faced a hard decision. Responsible for the integrity and faithfulness of his small, church-related high school in East Texas, the principal had just received shocking news from the basketball coach. The coach had discovered that the team they were scheduled to play in basketball the next week, the Cistercian Preparatory School of Dallas, was a Catholic school. A Catholic school with all this entails, priests and nuns, confessions and mass, and cardinals and popes. A Catholic school! In the interest of sound doctrine, there was only one decision the principal could make. He stood his ground and canceled the basketball game. "We thought they were merely a private school," the coach said. "We didn't know they were Catholic. We played them when we had a broader philosophy. Now we're going to play just Baptist schools."

More than one university is reluctant to play Notre Dame in football, but I am not sure that a religious issue is involved in the decision. Down in East Texas at the Longview Christian Academy, it was. What did God require of the school? Cancel the basketball game with people whose faith was different.

It is the oldest religious question in the world: what does God require of me if I am to be faithful to him? And what an incredible variety of answers have been given. Those answers have led men and women from the heights of beauty in music and service and devotion to the absolute depths of cruelty

and depravity. Preachers today seek to answer that question for all of us every Sunday, and prophets of old sought to do the same thing. Read that mixed tribe of prophets in the Old Testament, and you find each of them giving his own answer to the question. To be a faithful child of God, what is required of me?

What answer have you come to in your own journey of faith? To find out, try to decide how you would complete this sentence: "In religion, it is most important that I . . ." That I what? It is most important that I . . . what? Let us take a tour through some of the ways people of the past and present have answered that question.

For many people, belief is the most important thing. They answer, "In religion, the most important thing of all is that I believe right." Thus the principal of the Longview Christian Academy had but one choice to make. In his estimation, the folks over at Cistercian School didn't believe right, so the game was canceled.

Almost from the beginning, the Church has sought to sharpen up belief, to define it and protect it. In the earliest days of the Church, there was not but one requirement of faith: "Believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, and you will be saved." (Acts 16:31) And by the thousands, they came to the Church through belief in Jesus. But then, in an inevitable narrowing of horizons, church leaders began to define and restrict that belief. You believe in Jesus, that is just fine, but exactly *what* do you believe about him? And in its early centuries, the Church began to write its creeds, the Apostles Creed and Nicene Creed and the Creed of Constantinople--each one putting fences around belief and saying, "Not only must you believe in Jesus Christ, but it is important that you believe in him just as *we* do, and this creed will describe that for you."

Every Christian denomination faces the problem of trying to decide how strictly it must require every person to believe exactly the same within a church. In the 1980s, the Southern Baptist Convention has experienced severe internal tensions as they have tried to decide whether or not all Baptists must hold exactly the same view with regard to many issues of biblical interpretation. This great Protestant denomination has always been against creeds and central human authority in the Church, and has emphasized the responsibility of every believer to come to his or her own locus of faith. In difficult convention votes, however, they have moved away from this position and are saying that God requires that with regard to such issues as biblical interpretation, evolution, abortion, censorship, pornography, and makeup of seminary faculties, everyone must believe exactly the same. Their former president unequivocally stated several years back that God does not listen to the prayers of Jews, because Jews do not believe right. Not only must we

believe right, but we must see to it that people in our church believe right, too.

We watch with sympathy their plight, because it is one in which we all find ourselves from time to time. Do we have a right, indeed, a responsibility, to define faith narrowly and require that all in our fellowship conform to it? Who will be the deciders of this, who the examiners of faith, who the enforcers? Religion, then, is a matter of believing right, and many people answer very sincerely and devotedly, "The most important thing in religion is that I believe right. This is what God requires."

Another sizable force within modern Christianity says that the most important thing in religion is that I feel right. Put issues of belief over to the side. Don't discard them, by any means, but concentrate on feeling. How does your faith, your worship, make you feel?

Obviously, this is an important factor in religion. Many people come to worship half-defeated already by many uncontrollable factors in life. They come browbeaten, and they don't want to or need to be browbeaten any more. They come confused and perplexed by life's insolubles and frankly, they are not in the market for some of theology's more esoteric puzzles. What someone believes about the Millennium or the Rapture is irrelevant to them.

For these people, it is most important that they *feel* right in religion. Surely television and our modern entertainment standards add to this feeling of expectation and need. Most televised programs of religion are fast-moving and spicy. Choreographed choirs sing in rhythm; celebrities testify; bands play. Preachers emphasize how grand life can be if we will just think positively, and they offer the promises of wealth and success for those who give generously and tell of the wonderful things that are going to happen to you today. And if you do not like that message, just touch the remote control, and suddenly you are on another coast viewing another dancing choir and smiling preacher. Feeling is the key. You will never be made to feel uncomfortable by any allusion to the horrors of apartheid or the misery of poverty. People want to feel good in religion, and feeling good is what you will get.

It is a very subjective thing, and we ought to recognize the danger of elevating personal feeling to divine level. It means that I do not come to worship to be judged by God; *I come to do the judging*. I want to feel good! So I measure worship by me, rather than me by worship. The hymns must be familiar, the routine standard, the order well known. I do not want to work at worship. After all, there is no remote-control button to push here. If I start *this* program, I am generally stuck with it until the end, barring a providential nosebleed or coughing spell. So I want it to feel right. In religion, the most important thing is to feel good about what is presented in worship.

Historically, this leads to a third approach which has always said that the most important thing in religion is that we worship right. How quickly we become used to one specific order of worship or style of worship, and that order or style easily becomes more important than the God who enlivens it. The wrapping becomes more important than the contents.

In the early days of the Church, it was important to emphasize sound doctrine, but very soon, forms of worship became more important and divisive than doctrine. In most churches, it might be easier to change a basic doctrine than to change the order of worship on Sunday morning. A cartoon has the vigorous old elder saying to the green young minister, "You may have been to Harvard and Yale, Sonny, but around here the offering always comes before Communion."

It is most important that I worship right, and what does that mean? For some it means sitting in silence in a room and listening, Quaker-like, for God. For some it means a ritual of footwashing, for others a theological lecture. Some insist that right worship rules out the use of instrumental music, others that only a single cup may be used in Communion, which, some say, must be served weekly, others quarterly. Some Catholics want the mass said in Latin; some Amish insist that no one may come to worship in a mechanized vehicle. Churches have divided and wars have been fought over the issue of right worship, which is for some the most important part of faith.

The overemphasis on right worship gave birth to one other approach to what is most important in religion. It produced one of the most notable Old Testament prophets and inspired one of the best-known verses of the Bible. The prophet's name was Micah, and around 730 B.C. when he preached to the people of Judah, he disagreed with their idea that the most important thing in religion was to worship correctly.

He was worried about his nation, especially as the shadow of Assyria rose in the north. Assyria was a cruel, aggressive nation, and one by one, the smaller nations of the world were falling to her. Would this happen to Judah? Would God let it happen? Yes, indeed, Micah said, in a message that always brings a tightness to our hearts today. When God blesses a nation, Micah said, he expects unusual righteousness and compassion from it. And when that nation does not produce these attributes, God simply raises up another nation to destroy it and starts over again with someone else. (Micah 1:1-9, 2:3-10) To a complacent people, Micah brought this message.

Why were they so complacent? In part, at least, because they worshiped so right, so well. It was a worship built around sacrifices brought to the temple in Jerusalem. The ritual around the offering of sacrifice was honed to perfection. Micah preached to a people who believed right and felt right and

worshiped right, and he told them that something was missing, the most important thing of all.

Hear again the heart of the matter from Micah. "With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high? Shall I come before him with burnt offerings, with calves a year old? Will the Lord be pleased with thousands of rams, with ten thousands of rivers of oil? Shall I give my first-born for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul? He has showed you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?" (Micah 6:6-8) *The most important thing in religion is that I live right!*

Living right is the heart of the matter. Many years ago, the United States Senate was embroiled in a controversy over whether or not to seat the newly elected senator from Utah, Reed Smoot. Reed Smoot was a Mormon, and in those days, his church still allowed the practice of polygamy. Although Smoot himself had only one wife, some of the more sanctimonious members of the Senate argued that he should not be seated, that the beliefs of his church prohibited it. The issue was settled when Senator Boies Penrose of Pennsylvania strode to the podium and looked directly at some of his frequently philandering colleagues. "As for me," he said, "I would prefer to have seated beside me in the Senate a polygamist who doesn't polyg than a monogamist who doesn't monog." Acting right is more important than worshiping right, or feeling right, or believing right.

Right now, some folk who give worship of God such small priority may be perking up and saying, "See, the preacher agrees with me. How often I worship isn't as important as how I live." But what utter nonsense. I am absolutely astonished by those in our churches who claim all of God's promises, but who cannot find the will or the inner discipline to worship God. Do we really think that we are deceiving God with all this? Micah said that the most important thing in religion is that we live right, and that includes worship. "What does the Lord require of you but to walk humbly with your God?"

The heart of the matter is how we live, Micah said, and that includes all the other factors and moves beyond them to a life honestly balanced. One of our yearnings today is for simplicity and brevity. We have "two-minute managers" and "two-minute administrators" and "two-minute" too many things. It doesn't take two minutes, however, to recite this verse that many have found to say it all in religion. Take it with you as a gift from God when you need words to live by, for it is the heart of the matter of religion. "He has showed you. . . what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?"

Study Questions

1. Why do different people have such different ideas of what God requires of them?
2. How would you complete this sentence? "In religion, it is most important that I. . ." Why?
3. Have you ever been told by someone that you don't believe right in matters of faith? How did this make you feel? How did you respond?
4. Should all persons in a particular church believe exactly the same? Mostly the same? Why?
5. How important is it that you "feel right" in worship? What prevents this?
6. If Micah is right as to what is "the heart of the matter" on religion, what is the role of belief or faith?

"The vision of Obadiah. Thus says the Lord God concerning Edom"
Obadiah 1:1

"O daughter of Babylon, you devastator! Happy shall he be who requites you with what you have done to us! Happy shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!" Psalm 137:8-9

"If your enemy is hungry, give him bread to eat; and if he is thirsty, give him water to drink; for you will heap coals of fire on his head, and the Lord will reward you." Proverbs 25:21-22

"But I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment; whoever insults his brother shall be liable to the council, and whoever says 'You fool!' shall be liable to the hell of fire." Matthew 5:22

Obadiah: On Handling Hatred

You do not like Bill, and you admit it. You have good reason not to like him. Every time you have been down, Bill has stepped on you and seemed to enjoy doing it. He is arrogant and rude, and you have been the victim of more than one of his vicious comments. So your ears perk up immediately when you overhear someone say that Bill is in trouble. A business deal went awry, you hear, and Bill lost most of his money. More than that, his wife left him and he lost his job. Bill's life has fallen apart, and on hearing about this, how do you feel?

It must be one of the most revealing tests of our inner character, how we feel when someone we do not like has met misfortune. Does it surprise us to find in the Bible a whole book written by a man who failed that test completely? His name was Obadiah. Although that name may sound like that of a frontier mountain man, Obadiah means in Hebrew "servant of God." If you read this little book, you go away knowing only one thing for sure about this servant of God. He was filled with hatred. Someone he did not like was in trouble, and Obadiah was ecstatic about it.

Obadiah wrote from Jerusalem in about 450 B.C. He was a prophet, a preacher, and times were hard. The Jews had returned from Babylonian exile only to find Jerusalem destroyed, its walls and temple gone. Its neighbors had looted the holy city. Among those who had cheered when Jerusalem was destroyed were the people of Edom, a small neighboring nation just beyond the Dead Sea. Now, the tables were turned. Jerusalem had been partially

rebuilt, but Edom was suffering because of nomadic invasion from Arabia. Now Edom's people were exiles, Edom's cities captured. And no one enjoyed this more than did Obadiah, who exulted in Edom's misery.

So Obadiah wrote to express his glee that Edom was now suffering, just as Israel had suffered years before. It is a very short book, the shortest of the prophetic books, only twenty-one verses long. But every verse oozes with revenge and shows us one way of handling hatred. Do *we* score higher on this test than he did? How do *we* handle hatred?

We usually disguise it. Knowing it is wrong, we still feel its pull, so we often use subtle ways to get even. We dress it up, make it respectable, and put a smile on it. We are seldom as blatant as Obadiah in our responses, because we recognize hatred for what it is. So we choose our strategies carefully, and through innuendo and implication, we usually can make our feelings clear. A senior citizen once took his government check to the bank to cash it. Although it was plainly marked "Do not fold, staple, or mutilate," the old man had rumped it and folded it. When he endorsed it, the teller said, "You should be careful with your checks. You shouldn't rumple or fold them. The government doesn't like that."

"Well," said the senior citizen, "maybe that makes us even, because there are a few things that the government does that I don't like."

You hear those familiar words? "Maybe that makes us even!" Thus we may not staple or mutilate anyone, but we can certainly fold them around some carefully chosen words. Part-way even!

Someone tells of going through the check-out line at the grocery store and listening as an irate customer verbally abused the boy sacking up the groceries. She didn't like his hairstyle, and he moved too slowly, and young people were no good anymore, and he made more money than he should. Through it all, the carryout boy kept smiling cheerfully. Finally, the irate customer was gone. "You managed that very well," the observer said to the boy.

"Don't worry about me," he said, "I broke her eggs."

"What?"

"I've got a way of sacking the groceries for customers like her. When she gets home, her eggs will be broken and she won't be sure how it happened. She'll think they broke in the car."

The observer went away wondering how many times someone had found a hidden way to respond to and get even with her own rudeness.

A little bit of Obadiah showed through that grocery boy. Nothing blatant, mind you, no loud and ugly statements. He handled anger by disguising it and getting part-way even.

But it is hard to store hatred safely. Like some exceedingly strong acid, it can be bottled for awhile, but it eats its way out, and more than eggs get

broken. We may succeed in disguising it and put a smile on its face, but down in the basement of the mind, hatred has us mixing poison and making bombs, and once mixed and made, they will probably be used.

Just as Dr. Frankenstein could not keep the monster he made locked safely in his lab, so can we not house hatred and expect it to stay out of sight. It emerges and what should have been good times are destroyed. It happens with disturbing frequency in our society. At a shopping mall or on a busy street or in a place of business, someone with a seething hatred for the world appears, and tragedy results as that hatred explodes in violence.

We seldom intend it, but the terrorist inside our own skull sometimes gets loose. Our internal policeman, usually on duty, is busy elsewhere, and our often timid hatred is now at the wheel.

One of the most beautiful Psalms in the Old Testament suffers just this fate because of hatred of these same people of Edom. It is Psalm 137. Listen to the beautiful words with which the poet describes the pain of exile in Babylon. "By the waters of Babylon, there we sat down and wept, when we remembered Zion. On the willows there we hung up our lyres [harps]. For there our captors required of us songs, . . . saying, 'Sing us one of the songs of Zion.'" (Psalm 137:1-3) So far, so good. It is one of the most lyrical expressions of Israel's plight, told with feeling and beauty. "We hung our harps on the willow trees, and wept by the waters of Babylon." But suddenly hatred erupts, and this beautiful Psalm goes plunging down. The writer remembers the hated people of Edom back there laughing at Israel's plight, and he says, ". . . Happy shall he be who requites you with what you have done to us! Happy shall he be who takes your little ones and dashes them against the rock!" (Psalm 137:8-9)

Whether it is the beauty of a Psalm, or of a family reunion, or of a marriage, hatred seeps through and scorches the edges. We cannot store hatred safely, because it seeps out into our lives and marks us clearly. Friedrich Nietzsche once said that you must be careful when you fight a monster, lest you become one yourself. No matter how reasonable our hatred is, no matter how clearly some person or some nation has earned it, we cannot disguise it or store it up without it changing us for the worse.

One of the ways it does this is by blinding us to our own sins. Obadiah shows that clearly. In the entire book of Obadiah, there is not one word about Israel's sin, not a word. He condemns Edom for exactly what he is doing himself, saying to Edom: "But you should not have gloated over your brother in the day of his misfortune" (Obadiah 1:12) Yet this is exactly what Obadiah is doing himself, celebrating Edom's misfortune, celebrating so fully that he does not recognize Israel's sin as well. He affirms that God

judges the nations and rejoices that God is now punishing Edom, forgetting that *his* nation stands under God's judgment, too.

Bishop Oxnam is credited with having said that civilization is always like a little clearing on the edge of the jungle, and that at night, if you are quiet, you can hear the howling of the beasts. The jungle is always waiting, ready to take over the minute people relax their vigilance. So for us as individuals or as a nation, to hate is to let the beasts back in!

Isn't it obvious, then? *Hatred accomplishes nothing!* What good does it do? What final victories does it ever win? Read Obadiah's little book as a manual of how not to handle hatred. See bitterness and anger oozing out between the lines. And remember back to the last time you got even with someone, really paid them back. Remember how brief was the sense of triumph, and what a sour taste it left?

There is a dramatic moment at the end of the battle of Masada, when the Romans have finally won that mountain fortress from the Jews. The Roman commander, Flavius Silva, has spent a huge fortune in the campaign, has seen hundreds of his men die and thousands wounded, has watched in horror as the last Jewish defenders of Masada jump to their deaths rather than surrender. In that terrible moment, a young Roman officer rushes up to the commander and says, "Now we celebrate a great Roman victory." Flavius Silva looks at the barrenness all around, and says, "Great Roman victory? Look at it, man! We've won a rock in the middle of a desert, next to a poisoned sea!"

Next time we get even, next time we have really paid them back, we might step back and see just what it is we have won--a rock, maybe, in the middle of a desert, perhaps, next to a poisoned sea. What hollow victories hatred wins.

Obadiah brings us life in a negative way, because he points to a road that leads nowhere, and we recognize that, and we do not like what we see in Obadiah. He is selling us the wrong policy. Hatred has to be soaked up and sent away, and there is only one way to do that.

Jesus points to the road that leads us to life. It is from his Sermon on the Mount, and it is impossible to misunderstand these words: "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, 'Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you shall be children of your Father who is in heaven For if you love only those who love you, what reward have you?'. . ." (Matthew 5:43-46, paraphrase)

Isn't it clear? Forgiveness is the only antidote to hatred. Forgiveness is a garbage disposer, grinding hatred up and flushing it away. And it works! It is not that we have a duty to be loving and forgiving, it's that love works! In the most common experiences of life, at home and at the office and even at

church, it works. The only real way to handle hatred is to turn loose of it and love and forgive.

The French philosopher and scientist, Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, put it like this: "Some day, after mastering the winds, the waves, the tides and gravity, we shall harness for God the energies of love. And then, for the second time in the history of the world, men will have discovered fire!"⁸

Study Questions

1. How did it make you feel when you heard that the nuclear reactors in Chernobyl, Russia, had almost melted down? Why did you feel that way?
2. Is it better to express openly our hatred of someone or to disguise it in subtle ways? Why does this question seem unsatisfactory?
3. Have you seen people who find subtle ways to express their hatred? What are they?
4. Read Psalm 137. Does this remind you of Obadiah? Have you ever seen nations express this kind of hatred?
5. Can you think of exceptions where hatred does indeed accomplish something? What are they?
6. Read Matthew 5:43-44. Should we apply this to the international situation today? What difficulties would it cause? Why are we so willing to ignore these verses?

"Now the prophets, Haggai and Zechariah the son of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews who were in Judah and Jerusalem, in the name of the God of Israel who was over them." Ezra 5:1

"Then the word of the Lord came by Haggai the prophet, 'Is it a time for you yourselves to dwell in your paneled houses, while this house lies in ruins? Now therefore thus says the Lord of hosts: Consider how you have fared . . . Go up to the hills and bring wood and build the house, that I may take pleasure in it and that I may appear in my glory, says the Lord.'" Haggai 1:3-5,8

Haggai and Zechariah: The Temple Builders

A leader's duty, someone has said, is to paint on the walls of people's minds what they might become. In this sense, the prophets of Israel were painters, and the minds of the people of Israel were their canvas. The people did not always like the picture the prophets painted there, but Israel had a way of becoming what the prophets pictured.

About the year 520 B.C., two prophets came riding into Jerusalem ready to start painting. And Jerusalem needed them. The city had been completely destroyed some sixty years earlier in 586 B.C., and the people had been sent into exile in Babylon. But now, many of the exiles had returned, and they were scratching out a grubby existence in the once-magnificent holy city. Businesses were started, shops were built, homes erected. Things were slowly beginning to return to normal. But there was one empty spot in the very heart of Jerusalem. Although the people had seen to their own homes nicely enough, the place where the temple had stood was empty. There was no house of God, and no one seemed interested in rebuilding it.

But pictures started appearing on the walls of the people's minds, for the two prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, had a vision of a new and rebuilt temple in Jerusalem. And like two graffiti artists, Haggai and Zechariah painted that picture everywhere. In letters and in sermons and in visions and in dreams, always they drew pictures of the temple rebuilt. (Haggai 1,

Zechariah 1:16,4:7-10,6:12) Their effort was successful. Work on the temple was, indeed, begun, and four years later, the task was complete. (Ezra 6:14-15) Because these two obscure prophets kept painting a temple on the walls of the people's minds, a temple is what resulted.

Most of us today claim that we want to know God's will for our lives. We want the pictures on the walls of our minds to be upright and honorable. How can we attain that? We may not have the prophets with us, but we can have the prophets' strategy. Just suppose that these two crusty old prophets, Haggai and Zechariah, should walk into the cluttered city of our lives with the same strategy they brought to Jerusalem in 520 B.C. What would they have us do?

First, they would tell us, you identify the empty places in your life that most need filling. What kind of temple needs building? Get very specific. Most of us drown in generalities with regard to the good life. Yes, I have a vague feeling that I ought to be putting my religion to work, but I cannot find a single community agency I am interested in working with. Yes, I ought to be more involved in the life of the church, but don't ask me to work on one of those committees. Yes, I ought to be sharing my possessions more freely through the church, but please do not send me one of those irritating reminder letters about my pledge! Generalities!

But temples do not get built in general. All the good will which the people felt about the temple could not put one stone atop another in the rebuilding work. Good will does not do it. We have to get specific. The picture has to be painted, the priority set, and that is the first prophetic strategy. In some area of my life, I need a temple. What is it? Haggai and Zechariah spoke clearly of the priorities of the people of Jerusalem. Haggai has God saying, "My people, why should you be living in well-built houses while my Temple lies in ruins?" (Haggai 1:4, GNB) It was not that the people were idle. They were quite busy. The pictures on the walls of their minds were of nice houses and successful businesses and plenty to drink.

Most of us have similar pictures on the walls of *our* minds. Let me show you my car, my place at the lake, my portfolio of investments, my balance at the bank. We paint our own pictures quite well, and we become what we paint. But as successful as we are, then, why is this emptiness inside? Why, with barns so full, are our hearts so empty? Isn't it that my life needs a temple at its center, and I, quite frankly, haven't been in the temple business?

Should a prophet come barging into your life, the first thing he would do would be to establish your priorities. What is it that you really need most?

Second, the prophet would say, get started at it. I like the fact that the book of Haggai tells exactly when the people started on the temple. "They began working on the Temple of the Lord Almighty, their God, on the twenty-

fourth day of the sixth month of the second year that Darius was emperor." (Haggai 1:14-15, GNB) No worthwhile act can ever come to be without getting started. Columbus and his crew set sail for America on August 3, 1492. The Apollo astronauts left for the moon on December 19, 1971. There is always a necessary beginning moment for any good act.

That may be why Plato said, "The beginning is the most important part of the work."¹⁰ It is incredible how many good people wander through life with an armful of good intentions, but no beginnings. That empty space in your life that needs filling, that temple that needs building--all it waits on is a beginning. Haggai realized that, and so he had God say to his people, "Now, go into the hills and get lumber and rebuild the temple" (Haggai 1:8, GNB) *Now!*

An old college professor used to tell his classes: "You can forget everything you've learned in college. You can throw away your degree, but remember these four little words for the rest of your life. They will take you further than a score of college degrees. 'Beginning is half done.'" *Beginning is half done!*

The hardest task the people faced in Jerusalem was not building the temple, but *beginning* it. And that is precisely why all those little temples go unbuilt in our own lives, and why these empty places remain. We cannot get started! Think of that one thing you need most to do to get your life under control. Isn't this particular Sunday of this particular month of this particular year a time to begin? If not now, when? If not here, where? Jesus once scolded his disciples for their frequent willingness to put off doing what they should. "You have a saying, 'Four more months, and then the harvest.' But I tell you, take a good look at the fields; the crops are ripe and ready to be harvested." (John 4:35, GNB) Many of us start these personal temple-building projects like we start our diets--after the holidays are over, after the vacation, after the children start back to school. But as Paul said, ". . . Now is the acceptable time; . . . now is the day of salvation." (II Cor. 6:2) *Beginning is half done.*

Here is a person you may know. Listen to a bit of anonymous folk poetry which describes him, and see if he might live at your house:

He was going to be all that a mortal should be--tomorrow.
No one would ever be better than he--tomorrow.
Each morning he stacked up the letters he'd write,
Each evening he'd tell of the battles he'd fight--tomorrow.
He was a man who worked like a fiend--tomorrow.
The world would have known him had he ever seen--tomorrow.
But the fact is, he died, and faded from view,

And all that was left when living was through
Was a mountain of things he intended to do--tomorrow.

Here these prophets are, then, scratching away on the wall of your mind, painting a picture. First, decide what needs doing in your life, and second, start on it.

Finally, they say, if you get started, you will be amazed at the unexpected good things that result. The temple itself will be built, of course, but beyond that, new and unexpected things will happen.

Zechariah emphasized this point especially. Build the temple, he said, and a new age will begin, and good things you never dreamed of will start happening. The Messiah will come! And he pictures some images that take us straight to Jesus. In Zechariah, we have the familiar picture of the Messiah entering Jerusalem riding on the colt of the donkey (Zechariah 9:9), the thirty pieces of silver as the value of the Messiah's life (Zechariah 11:12-13), the Messiah's death (Zechariah 12:10 and 13:6). Build the temple, the prophet said, and things you never dreamed of will begin to happen.

Any good act has long-range, unexpected results. Fill up some personal empty place in your life, and like dropping a stone in the water, the ripples go out and out from it. Where they finally stop and whom they eventually touch, we cannot know. Build a temple, and we cannot know who will find strength in its shelter. George Hamilton Combs, founding minister of Country Club Christian Church, put it in words that are found on the wall of the church's chapel: "What we begin, others who come after us will complete. The good is like the building of a cathedral. Only through faith can those who lay foundation stones hear bells ringing in upraised steeples."

The rebuilding of that temple in Jerusalem was but a beginning. It started a chain of events that leads straight through Jesus Christ to you and me today. So with any personal temple built--it will radiate outward into the lives of so many and touch them in ways we cannot ever know.

Into a town without a temple two prophets came, and they painted a vision of what might be, and what they painted became reality. Into lives without temples, God still comes today through Jesus Christ, and his step echoes through the empty places in our lives. Our prayer, then, is that of the poet:

We would be building; temples still undone
O'er crumbling walls their crosses scarcely lift
Waiting till love can raise the broken stone,
And hearts creative bridge the human rift;
We would be building, Master, let Thy plan

Reveal the life that God would give to man

O keep us building, Master; may our hands
Ne'er falter when the dream is in our hearts,
When to our ears there come divine commands
And all the pride of sinful will departs;
We build with Thee, O grant enduring worth
Until the heav'nly Kingdom comes on earth.¹¹

Study Questions

1. With so much need in the world today, how can we justify spending so much energy and money on building churches (temples)?
2. What kind of pictures are you drawing on the walls of your mind right now? Does this affect what you are building of life?
3. How did your present church get built? Who were the Haggais and Zechariahs who made it possible?
4. Can you think of some personal temples that you need to begin right now? Are there some national temples that remain unbuilt?
5. Can you think of ways in which some personal temple-building project had unexpected beneficial results in the lives of others?
6. Who does the painting on the walls of your children's minds today? Who sets our national priorities?

"The oracle of the word of the Lord to Israel by Malachi. 'I have loved you,' says the Lord. But you say, 'How hast thou loved us?' 'Is not Esau Jacob's brother?' says the Lord. 'Yet I have loved Jacob but I have hated Esau'" Malachi 1:1-3

"Have we not all one father? Has not one God created us? Why then are we faithless to one another, profaning the covenant of our fathers?" Malachi 2:10

"For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name is great among the nations, and in every place incense is offered to my name, and a pure offering; for my name is great among the nations says the Lord of hosts." Malachi 1:11

"Bring the full tithes into the storehouse, that there may be food in my house; and thereby put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing." Malachi 3:10

Malachi: Religion at the Crossroads

Why did these two men turn out so differently? Their stories have many, almost uncanny, similarities, yet their endings are poles apart. Both men were successful in other fields before they felt God calling them to ministry. Both loved music. Both were able through personal charisma to attract devoted, almost fanatical, followers. Both felt led to move their operations to the equator and there set up religious communities. Finally, there in their jungle compounds, both men died, and the world's attention focused on their deaths. One was Albert Schweitzer in Lambarene, Africa, and the other was Jim Jones, Jonestown, British Guyana, one a saint, the other a scoundrel.

What different directions religion can take us! It has within itself the seeds of the very best and the very worst that can be grown in the human heart. The worst vices and the best virtues are mirror images of one another and come from the same source. Augustine wallowed in sin long enough to become a saint, while the Ayatollah Khomeini became so saturated with holiness that he filled up with hatred.

Religion is a powerful agent, bringing us to many a crossroad where we decide whether to make of it something good or something evil. No wonder religion has been defined by people through the years in such diverse ways. Havelock Ellis asserted that religion is the sum of the expansive impulses of a being. "No," said William James, "religion is a monumental chapter in the his-

tory of human egotism." "Religion," said the apostle James, "is feeding widows and orphans." "No," said Karl Marx, "religion is the opiate of the people."

Which witness are we to believe? You and I, who come to worship each Sunday because of the religious impulse, need to recognize that religion by itself can be used well or badly, and the book of Malachi illustrates this for us clearly. It shows us that religion is always bringing us to a crossroad, where we decide how it shall be used. A quick look, then, at Malachi!

Malachi is an easy book to find. It is the last of the thirty-nine books of the Old Testament, so we find it just before the New Testament. This short little prophetic book stands on the latter edge of the Old Testament, peering across 400 years of silence to the birth of Jesus and the opening of the New Testament.

Who wrote it? We assume casually that it was written by a prophet whose name was Malachi, but that is not certain. The proper name *Malachi* occurs nowhere else in the Bible, and the word *malachi* in Hebrew means, simply, *my messenger*. The writer may have been unwilling to use his real name and offered this prophetic book anonymously, just as people sometimes get fervent letters signed, simply, *a friend*.

When was it written? Because a Persian king is mentioned, the date seems fairly certain to be about 450 B.C., after the people of Israel had returned from exile and after the temple had been rebuilt.

What was Malachi's main concern? The four short chapters seem to aim at this question: why aren't things going any better for God's people here in Jerusalem? Why are we having such problems? In his response, Malachi admits that their own sins were causing many of their problems, notes that other nations were experiencing similar difficulties, and then asserts confidently that a final judgment would one day balance the scales, and God's justice would prevail.

But what stands out most clearly as we read the book of Malachi are the evidences of both good and bad religion present. At that moment, 400 years before Jesus, religion was standing at the crossroads, with good impulses pulling one way and bad impulses another. This takes on a present-day importance when we realize that we, too, with our religion face the same pulls in different directions. Religious ideas can give nourishment and strength, or they can become rancid and foul, and we stand always at the crossroads ourselves.

Look at some of the tensions in Malachi's religion, the points at which great religious ideas can develop so that they either strengthen us or lead us astray.

Take this question, for example. *Whom does God love in this world?* Does he have any favorite children? Malachi found his own religion pulling him in

opposite directions here. A part of him wanted to believe that all people everywhere were equally God's children, and he stated it explicitly: "Have we not all one father? Has not one God created us?" . . . (Malachi 2:10) It is the religious impulse that tells us that we are *all* brothers and sisters, all of us, Americans and Argentinians and British and Russians. All of us are children of God.

It is one of the grandest of religious impulses, and Malachi genuinely felt it. But he apparently could not live by it. Its fullest implications, he could not accept. He may have said, "Have we not all one father," but he did not believe it, and he did not act on it. The seeds of the awful hatred between Jew and Arab are planted in Malachi. At the very first of his book, he put in God's mouth his own prejudice, and has God saying, ". . . I have loved Jacob [i.e., the Jews], but I hated Esau [the Arabs!]" (Malachi 1:2-3) And Malachi threatened excommunication to anyone who married a non-Jewish spouse.

Like many of us, he could be magnanimous in his beliefs and might worship a magnificent, universal God, but in his practices, his God shrank down to the size of his own prejudices. He pictured God as keeping a book in which all those who are observant of God's rules will be listed, ". . . a book of remembrance . . .," he says. (Malachi 3:16)

Do we not feel the same pulling in two directions in our religious awareness here? At our best, we echo Malachi's observation, "Has not one God created us all?" and we reach out in compassion around the world. We echo Paul's affirmation, "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus." (Galatians 3:28) And we sing John Oxenham's great hymn, "In Christ there is no east or west, in him no south or north, but one great fellowship of men upon the whole wide earth." No doubt about it, we are pulled in this direction.

But through all this, the little echo keeps surfacing: we all have one Father, yes, but doesn't he love *us* most of all? Aren't we in America God's chosen people? Maybe he does love the Russians and the Chinese, but aren't we special? And don't we feel the goose bumps when we all stand and sing, "God bless America, land that I love."

Both impulses are present in our religion, make no mistake about it, and we are always at this crossroads between love and hatred. So Rabbi Meir Kahane spouts his hate-filled diatribes in Israel, calling for removal of all Arab peoples from the West Bank, and in rural mid-America the Jew-hating extremists increasingly blame all economic woes on Jewish people. And in less dramatic ways, the mixed message of Malachi plays in our own lives. "Have we not all one Father?" Malachi asks in one breath, and in the next, "God hates the Arabs."

Another mixed message in Malachi concerns the act and flavor of worship. Divine worship praises God's name, he says. "For from the rising of the sun to its setting my name is great among the nations, and in every place incense is offered to my name, and a pure offering . . ." (Malachi 1:11)

So far, so good. Malachi stresses the grandness of worship and its life-changing importance. But then his interest focuses in on the purity of worship, and he becomes inordinately concerned with *how* God is worshiped. Like a disgruntled churchgoer, Malachi forgets his joy at worship and begins to criticize exactly how it is being done. "This is disgraceful," he seemed to say. The food you offer on the altar is not the best quality. (Malachi 1:7) The animals you bring for sacrifice have blemishes on them (Malachi 1:14) The priests seem bored with the service. (Malachi 1:13) Too many of the people do not pay their fair share. (Malachi 3:8) God's name may have been praised, but Malachi played "trivial pursuit" with worship, and almost lost its wonder.

Here is another crossroads faced by the most loyal Christians! The more frequently we worship, the more likely we are to become harsh critics of the details that make it up. We can take the wrong turn at worship, and go away angry because the hymns were too new or too old, the organ too loud or too soft, the sermon too long or too short, or too biblical or not biblical enough, the Communion wine too sweet or too sour, or we did not hear enough about social issues or we heard too much, or the sanctuary was too warm or too cool. And holy worship gets entrapped in all this.

Again, this is a particular problem for the very best churchgoers. We get so involved, so interested in the details, that our church *always comes up short*, never quite satisfying. It is sad, in a way, that some of the most devoted church members, some who are at the heart of their church's life, are least likely ever to have said a single affirmative word about their church. The animals were blemished, the offering not good enough. Some persons want to be the designated hitter at church, and they specialize in finding fault.

Are any of the details with which Malachi and his modern counterparts are concerned unimportant? No, they are all important, but we see what taking the wrong turn here does to all of us. Malachi came to worship, talking about the grandness of God, but he ended up examining cattle. And this explains why, for many of us, worship begins at 11 o'clock sharp, and ends at 12 o'clock dull!

One other fork in the road in Malachi's religion concerned his beliefs about the way God works in the world. Malachi believed firmly in God's justice, and especially that one day the scales would be balanced, evil would be punished, and "for you who fear my name the sun of righteousness shall rise, with healing in its wings." (Malachi 4:2)

It is a grand theme, one thoroughly backed by Jesus himself. "When the Son of man comes in his glory, . . . before him will be gathered all the nations, and he will separate them one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats" (Matthew 25:31-32) This is a thread that runs through all great religions, this conviction that there is, finally, an accounting.

But Malachi went considerably beyond this and expected God to make a quicker judgment. Surely, in this life, here and now, God responds more quickly. Malachi even brings stewardship into it. Apparently there was a shortage of funds at the temple, and Malachi exhorted his people to give a full tithe. They are robbing God if they bring less, he said. And if they do bring the full tithe, all manner of good things will happen. He has God challenging the people to test him here. ". . . Put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts, if I will not open the windows of heaven for you and pour down for you an overflowing blessing." (Malachi 3:10) "If you will give generously," Malachi seemed to say, "the locusts will leave your fields, the crops will flourish, and you will be the envy of the nations."

It is again a temptation in faith to see God as a giant paymaster, ready to reward us for good and dock us for evil, here, now, immediately. Woody Allen once said about religion that he would believe, if only God would give him a clear sign, like making a large deposit in his name in a Swiss bank. Righteousness and integrity have their own rewards, and our faith in the final justice of God cannot be trivialized by expectations of a daily balancing of the books.

In Malachi, are not the hazards of faith clearly stated? Religion is always in danger of hardening of the arteries. By what we choose to do with it, it can become great or it can become small. Four hundred years later, the impulse of Malachi to trivialize religion resulted in the Pharisaic party of Judaism, those narrow-minded souls so concerned with the small details of faith that they lost the way. But Malachi's larger impulse, his best instincts, led to Jesus Christ, who put the whole issue well in his statements to the narrow-minded about him: "Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! for you tithe mint and dill and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faith" (Matthew 23:23)

In a sense, that is always our dilemma in our religion. Mint and dill and cummin, the smallest details, on the one side, and justice and mercy and faith on the other. Which does our religion focus on? Religion *must* result in small disciplines, but the small disciplines are not religion.

I listened recently to a beautiful organ concert by Dr. John Ditto. Among his pieces was Bach's "Passacaglia Fugue in C Minor." Before the piece began, I read the program notes which said this: "The 'Passacaglia' begins by stating a noble eight-measure theme, and then puts it through a seamless

progression of twenty restatements during which it is clothed in a great variety of musical outfits." On reading this, I decided to see if I could concentrate well enough to count the twenty "restatements" on the theme. As Dr. Ditto played, I counted, and sure enough, I hit it right on the nose. But as I later reflected on this, I realized that I had so concentrated on the twenty repetitions that I had missed the beauty of the "Passacaglia" itself.

One impulse of religion focuses in on details, and if this is overdone, we miss the melody of faith itself. But this is the crossroad to which our religion constantly brings us. We may take the basic ingredient and make of it something great, or something small. John Oxenham puts it clearly for us:

To every man there openeth
A Way, and Ways, and a Way.
And the High Soul climbs the High Way
And the Low Soul gropes the Low,
And in between, on the misty flats,
The rest drift to and fro.
But to every man there openeth
A High Way, and a Low.
And every man decideth
The way his soul shall go.¹²

Study Questions

1. Do you agree that religion *can* turn out to be detrimental for some and beneficial to others? Can you think of examples of this?
2. Should life automatically go better for Christians than for non-Christians? Why *do* people of God continue to have problems?
3. How do you respond to the assertion that the Jews were God's own people? Who, in this world, are *not* God's people?
4. Does God today have a favored nation? A favored religion? How does he show it?
5. Do you find worship often cluttered up with such a collection of details that its value is lessened? Are details in worship unimportant?
6. Does your church pay more attention to the organizational duties of faith than it does to the gospel of Christ? If so, what can you do about that?

"As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax office; and he said to him, 'Follow me.' And he rose and followed him." Matthew 9:9

"Now the birth of Jesus Christ took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been betrothed to Joseph, before they came together she was found to be with child of the Holy Spirit." Matthew 1:18

"Simon Peter replied, 'You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.' And Jesus answered him, 'Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jona! For flesh and blood has not revealed this to you, but my Father who is in heaven. And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the powers of death shall not prevail against it." Matthew 16:16-18

Matthew: A New-Member Manual

According to ancient tradition, the Gospel of Matthew was written by a tax-collector, and if this is true, the clarity and the simplicity of this Gospel come as a surprise to anyone who reads it. Imagine, a Gospel written by a tax-collector! What do you suppose a gospel written by the IRS might sound like today?

"Once there was an adult male named Joseph, a self-employed carpenter with two dependents, Mary, who was an unemployed housekeeper, and a minor son named Jesus. Jesus was born six days before December ended, and thus provided Joseph with a full deduction for the entire year. Jesus was born in Bethlehem while Joseph and Mary were on a business-related trip, which could not be deducted. The family received considerable assets of gold, frankincense, and myrrh while in Bethlehem, and a ruling has not yet been made on whether this increase in net worth should be reported as income on line 12, page 2."

Enough of that! The fact remains that this first Gospel has always been attributed to one Matthew, a tax-collector from Capernaum. "As Jesus passed on from there, he saw a man called Matthew sitting at the tax office; and he said to him, 'Follow me.' And he rose and followed him." (Matthew 9:9) The Scripture tells us almost nothing more of this disciple, but years later, Matthew became famous as the writer of the New Testament book that bears his

name. Almost all the church fathers of the second century credit Matthew with being the writer of the Gospel. In recent times, scholars suggest that the disciple perhaps wrote portions of the book, but that a Christian editor must have pieced Matthew's work together with other sources to create this first Gospel. Most of our biblical books have been given final form by such editors. But once assembled, Matthew's Gospel became the most popular of all. This book is quoted more frequently by the second-century Christian writers than all the other Gospels put together. No wonder it was given first place when the New Testament was finally assembled.

Matthew may be the first Gospel in the New Testament, but it was not the first Gospel written. Mark has that honor, telling in simple, brief terms the basic story of Jesus' ministry. If a Gospel already existed, why did Matthew write another? Mainly because he felt Mark left out too much material that new Christians needed to know. Most Christians in those days were new Christians. They had not been raised in Christian families--the movement was too new for that. So Matthew tried to put himself in the place of a new convert to Christianity, particularly a Jewish convert, and asked himself, "What would I, a brand-new Christian, want to know about Jesus and this work he did?" In answering that question, Matthew, in a sense, put together the first new-member manual, and it became a best seller.

A new Christian, he seemed to say, should know three things: where Jesus came from, what Jesus taught, and what Jesus left behind.

First, he said, followers of Jesus must always remember where he came from. His Gospel, therefore, confronted them and us with the fact that Jesus was God's Son. More than this, Jesus was the Messiah, the Savior, the one whom God had long been promising through the prophets. Again and again, then, Matthew, in relating an incident in Jesus' life, pointed out that this event happened in fulfillment of the prophecies of the Old Testament. Jesus was promised by God and came from God.

Any Christian who treats the call to faith too casually must remember this: Jesus was God's Son, long prophesied, long awaited. He was not simply a prophet, not simply a teacher, not simply a good and just man. He was God's only Son and thus has a unique claim on our lives. In order to prove this, Matthew described in detail the strange surroundings of Jesus' birth. Mark, the first-written Gospel, started his story when Jesus was already grown. So did John.

But not Matthew. The first two chapters of his book tell of Jesus' birth and of the wise men who came from the east to celebrate it. Only Matthew told of the wise men. Only in Matthew do we learn of Herod's murder of the Jewish children and of the holy family's flight to Egypt. Most important of all, Matthew made the claim, the astonishing claim, that Jesus was born of a vir-

gin, the child of a human mother and the Holy Spirit of God. That claim of Matthew has caused discussion in Christian theology ever since. Its centrality in Christian faith has become the subject of great controversy. It is only in Matthew and Luke that any reference to the Virgin Birth is found. Neither Mark nor John refer to it at all. After the first chapters of Matthew and Luke, the idea of a virgin birth is never mentioned again in the New Testament. As prolific a writer as Paul was, he never mentioned it. Nor does Peter, or John, or the Revelation, or the book of Acts. After its brief introduction in Matthew and Luke, the idea of a virgin birth is simply dropped and never referred to again.

Matthew's point in telling it was simply that Jesus came from God, and any disillusioned Christian needs to recall the source from which Jesus came. However diminished or flawed our faith may become today, its source is God. Christians in Matthew's day and in our own need to keep this truth fresh in mind--where Jesus came from.

Sometimes when I cross one of the bridges over the Missouri River near downtown Kansas City, I look down and see that river, grimy and polluted. But as I glance at that muddy river, I remember spending a night or two in Billings, Montana. The motel was next to the sparkling Yellowstone River, which flows north and east to become the major source of water for the Missouri. And standing by that fresh river in Billings, I could look southwest and see the mountains of Yellowstone, from which the river had come, and could remember seeing that sparkling, clear torrent of water pouring over the great falls of the Yellowstone, fresh and alive and pure. Every river is sky-born, someone has said, born in the melting snows of the high country. It is good to go back to the source, and see its purity and its beauty.

How quickly, for Christians of every century, faith becomes soiled and grimy, crusted over with compromise and polluted with disbelief and doubt. And how important it is that we remember that the source of our faith is God. "God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son . . .," (John 3:16,KJV) the Gospel says, and Matthew, above all other Gospels, stresses that we need to know and remember where Jesus came from.

Moreover, Matthew felt, every Christian needs to know what Jesus said. So more than any other, Matthew is a teaching Gospel. Do not read it thinking that you can escape with some names and dates and places. Matthew's kind of teaching reaches out and confronts the reader with the radical teachings of Jesus. He gives us a variety of parables and sayings greater in scope than in any other of the Gospels. No wonder Matthew was the most frequently quoted Gospel in the church's history. No wonder it was chosen to lead the parade of books in the New Testament!

If you want to find the Sermon on the Mount, you find it only in Matthew (Chapters 5-7). The Beatitudes are only in Matthew, the parable of the Last Judgment, only in Matthew. (Matthew 25:31-46) Matthew never tried to soften the teachings of Jesus in order to make them easier to accept. He emphasized, instead, the radical kind of righteousness Jesus demanded. "You have heard that it was said, . . . 'You shall not kill'. . . but I say to you that every one who is angry with his brother shall be liable to judgment" (Matthew 5:21-22) "You have heard that it was said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth.' But I say to you . . . if any one strikes you on the right cheek, turn to him the other also." (Matthew 5:38-39) "You have heard that it was said, 'You shall love your neighbor and hate your enemy.' But I say to you, Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." (Matthew 5:43-44) "Do not lay up for yourselves treasures on earth" (Matthew 6:19) "Judge not, that you be not judged." (Matthew 7:1) On and on they go, these radical demands of Jesus.

Do we today take seriously these teachings from one who came from God? The fact is that many an earnest Christian today can accept where Jesus came from, but not what he said. Right in the middle of those hard teachings, we stall out. Someone reports having been busy shoveling snow from his driveway one January day when a couple of boys with shovels came by. "Would you like your driveway shoveled, mister?" they asked. The man explained that he had already made a good start on the job. "Well," said the older boy, "we get most of our jobs from people who are half through."

And that is about how far many of us are able to get in these demanding teachings of Jesus. Most of the church's business is with those of us who are halfway through, drawn close by the attractiveness of Jesus, but stalled out because his teachings are hard. Matthew's purpose was never to make those teachings easy enough for us to follow, but to make us, his readers, strong enough that we might follow them gladly.

You need to know not only where Jesus came from, but also what he said, Matthew believed, and so he gave us these teachings.

Finally, you need to know what Jesus left behind. It is the Church! He left the Church for us! Now that does not sound very startling to us today, because we take the Church quite for granted. But is it surprising to learn that Matthew is the only one of the four Gospels even to mention the word *church*? (Matthew 16:18 and 18:17) Luke never refers to the Church in his Gospel, nor does John, nor does Mark. Only in Matthew is the idea of the Church to be found.

For Matthew, the Church was to be the laboratory where the unique teachings of this unique Savior were to be put to the test. More than any other Gospel, Matthew saw that to survive and flourish, the teachings of

Jesus needed a community in which to take root and grow. Undoubtedly in his day, there were many who were attracted by the beauty of Jesus' teachings, but who could not tolerate the Church with its controversies and complexities. But one goes with the other, Matthew held.

In our own day, there are many who are drawn by the gospel of love which Jesus taught, but impatient with the slow-moving, ponderous Church in which it rests. Of course, the Church is flawed, and those of us who work in it know this far better than any outsiders ever could. But the Church remains the God-given vehicle for his redeeming love. Someone might well say, "I am all for medicine, but against hospitals." Or, "I am all for law, but against courts." Any noble idea has to find human expression, and that human expression is frequently, almost inevitably, flawed.

It is precisely because we *are* flawed that we need the Church. Here those teachings of Jesus act and interact on us, focusing our attention both on the private needs of our own hearts and on the aching needs of the world about us. Jesus' teachings point in both these directions, and in the Church we put them to work.

This is one fascinating aspect to the Church's life. As we put those teachings of Jesus to work, it isn't always clear whether we are serving or being served. Today, this moment, we are giving ourselves in worship, but we are receiving strength and encouragement to keep on. Even when we offer help to some specific person, who is really receiving most from the act?

After church one winter Sunday, when the walks and parking lots were ice coated, I finally headed for my car to leave. A young woman stood at the door, about to leave as I did. I looked at the ice, and as we had already helped several to get to their cars, I said to her, "How about an arm?"

"Sure," she said enthusiastically and grasped hold of my arm rather tightly, I thought. Together, we carefully walked out to the two cars parked close to one another, and as she released my arm, she glanced back at the church and said, "You know, there might be some other older persons I could help. I think I'll go back and check." And off she danced across the ice, back to find another slow-moving person.

And that, I thought, was the Church at its best, a relationship in which all of us are helping one another, often unconsciously, not always sure which of us is leaning and which of us is supporting. Because the teachings of Jesus, put to work, can create that kind of institution, Matthew reminded us of the Church Jesus left behind.

Matthew is a manual for new members and for older ones as well. Matthew says: remember where Jesus came from, remember what Jesus said, and remember what he left behind. If you have not read that manual lately, today is a good day to begin.

Study Questions

1. Do you have a favorite among the four Gospels? Which is it? Why?
2. How important in Christian faith is Matthew's description of the Virgin Birth of Jesus? Why do you think neither Mark nor John referred to it? Should it be a test of faith for you today?
3. Which part of the Sermon on the Mount do you like best? Which part is hardest to follow in life today?
4. What do you do with those parts of Jesus' teachings you simply cannot follow? (Matthew 5:43-44,6:19,7:1) Are these teachings to be taken literally?
5. Why was the Church not mentioned in Mark, Luke, or John?
6. Does your church ever deliberately try to decide how well its people follow the teachings of Jesus? Should the church do this? What do we do with those members who flagrantly ignore Jesus' teachings?

"Luke the beloved physician and Demas greet you." Colossians 4:14

"Epaphras, my fellow prisoner in Christ Jesus, sends greetings to you, and so do Mark, Aristarchus, Demas, and Luke, my fellow workers." Philemon 23-24

". . . He opened the book and found the place where it was written, 'The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord.' And he closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant, and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And he began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'" Luke 4:17-21

Luke: The Gentle Gospel

Just suppose a group of us church folk found ourselves marooned on a desert island. All our physical needs were supplied, let us say, but we had no books at all, not even a Bible. We had plenty of blank paper and pencils, and so we decided to write a gospel ourselves. Each of us would remember and describe the stories and sayings of Jesus that had stuck in our minds, and we would put them all together and write them down, and behold, a new gospel. It would be a gospel according to us. What stories about Jesus would *you* remember and want included?

In a sense, that is how the first Gospels were written. Years after Jesus was gone, the early Church felt a need for a written record of what he had said and done. Memories were searched, stories collected, and then an author wrote them down. Four times that happened, and those four versions of the life of Jesus were placed at the first of our New Testament: Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John, the four Gospels, each containing a collection of stories remembered about Jesus, each different from the others.

Back, then, to our imagined predicament. Suppose that we were doing this ourselves. With no access to written records, we have to offer what *we* remember hearing about Jesus. Which stories would you remember? What each of us would remember and write down would tell almost as much about us as about Jesus. Certain stories we like. Certain stories make us uncomfortable. What we remember about Jesus is filtered through our own set of strengths and weaknesses.

Some of us who are facing health crises might remember the stories of Jesus healing persons who were ill. If we are quite young, we might remember his kindness to children. If we tend toward aggressiveness, we might remember and share the story of Jesus chasing the money-changers out of the temple. If we tend to be somewhat hawkish, we might remember Jesus saying, "I came not to bring peace, but a sword." (Matthew 10:34, paraphrase) Simon Peter was famous for his violent temper, and in a New Testament letter attributed to him, Peter remembered with amazement that when Jesus was reviled, he did not revile in return! (I Peter 2:23)

When we assemble all our own recollections and write them down, we will have told something about Jesus and about ourselves at the same time. Focus, then, on the Gospel of Luke. As the light of God shines through that book into our lives today, what do we learn about Luke and about Jesus and about ourselves?

First, what do we know about Luke? We know that he appears in the New Testament well after the death of Jesus. He was a friend and traveling companion of Paul, the first great Christian missionary. Luke is mentioned only five times in the New Testament. He is called "the beloved physician" (Colossians 4:14) and is said to have been with Paul in prison (Philemon 24 and II Timothy 4:11). He grew up a Gentile, not a Jew, (Colossians 4:11) and is said to have been from Antioch (Acts 13:1). In summary, he was born in Antioch, a Gentile, and was a doctor and Paul's companion during his journeys and imprisonments.

Other things we may guess at. He was probably educated at Tarsus, where the closest thing to a medical school and hospital in the ancient world was located. Tarsus was Paul's home, too, and it is possible that the two may have been acquainted in those days. Luke apparently returned to Antioch to practice medicine, and there he heard the Christian gospel and became a Christian. He was the only one of the four Gospel writers who had not been acquainted with Jesus personally. Like all of us, his knowledge of Jesus was secondhand.

But he was converted to Christianity, traveled with Paul about the ancient world, and wrote his Gospel as volume one of a two-volume work. The second volume is known as the book of Acts in the New Testament, a narrative about what happened in the years after Jesus died and was raised to new life. A quick reading of the first four verses of these two books, Luke and Acts, shows their common authorship.

But turn to the Gospel itself. Of all the hundreds of stories being circulated about Jesus' life and teachings, which ones did Luke choose to include in his Gospel? We should not be surprised to see that Luke's own background shows through in his Gospel.

For example, Luke's Gospel enters into a controversy that was raging in the early Church. They had furious disagreements in those early days, and one of those disagreements concerned the reach of the gospel. Is it for the Jews only, or is it intended for all people everywhere? Many were saying that Jesus was born a Jew, he was the Jewish Messiah, and therefore, the early Church should work only among the Jews, and not among the Gentiles at all. Inasmuch as Luke himself was a Gentile attracted by the beauty of Jesus' teachings, one can quickly guess which side of this argument he was on.

Luke wanted no walls around Christianity, and in his Gospel, argued for the universality of the gospel. How did he do this? He did it in a number of small ways. Other Gospels traced Jesus' ancestry back to Abraham, the father of the Jews. Luke traced it back to Adam, the father of all people. (Luke 3:38) In the beautiful story of Jesus' birth, Luke states specifically that Jesus was to be "a light for revelation to the Gentiles" (Luke 2:32) The other Gospels omit this. In the instructions given to the disciples after Jesus' death, Luke says that the disciples were to go and preach ". . . to *all* nations, beginning from Jerusalem." (Luke 24:47, emphasis added)

Christianity was intended, and *is* intended, for all people around this earth. Whenever our own religion, our own compassion, tends to become clubby, reserved only for our kind of people, we need to remember the appeal for universalism found in Luke's Gospel.

But the most remarkable emphasis of the book is its repeated description of Jesus' concern for mistreated, downtrodden people. When Luke wanted to describe what Jesus' mission was, here is the way he had Jesus put it: "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those who are oppressed...." (Luke 4:18, quoting Isaiah 61:1-2) You hear those words? "He has sent me for..." the poor, the captives, the oppressed. "That sounds pretty radical," someone says. "It sounds pretty scriptural," someone else answers. In Luke's Gospel, Jesus got very specific in his championing of the downtrodden in life.

The most hated minority in Israel in those days were the Samaritans. Because of historic enmity going back for centuries, there was great hatred of the Samaritans. They were despised by the best people. Yet look what Luke alone among the Gospel writers has Jesus saying about the Samaritans. Remember the parable about the traveler from Jericho set upon by robbers and badly wounded? Not a single Jew stopped to help, in Jesus' story, not even a Jewish priest. The only one who stopped was a Samaritan. The Parable of the Good Samaritan is found in only one place in Scripture, and that is in Luke 10. Or remember the story of Jesus healing the ten lepers?

Only one came back to thank him, and that one was a Samaritan. Only in Luke is that detail noted. (Luke 17:16)

Another group in Luke's Gospel received gentle concern from Jesus. There was no discussion of deadbeats on welfare rolls on Jesus' part, but rather, a genuine grieving at economic conditions that produced poverty and hunger, generation after generation. More than in any other Gospel, there is on Jesus' part in Luke a concern for the poor and the suffering.

Remember the Parable of the Rich Man and Lazarus? That is found only in Luke. (Luke 16:20-31) Or the Parable of the Rich Man who ignored human needs about him and built bigger barns? That occurs only in Luke. (Luke 12:16-21) Or the long list of Beatitudes for the poor and woes to the rich? Only in Luke! (Luke 6:20-26) Time and again in Luke's Gospel, Jesus champions the cause of the poor.

Other social outcasts as well received Jesus' strong concern in Luke. What about the hated tax collectors? The story of Zacchaeus, one of the most hated of them, occurs only in Luke (Luke 19:1-10). The parable of the self-righteous Pharisee and the hated Publican? It occurs only in Luke (Luke 18:9-14). The lepers? Again and again in this Gospel written by a physician, Jesus' healing ministry is described. What about outcast young people? The most beautiful parable of all, that of the runaway boy and his waiting father, the Prodigal Son, occurs only in Luke (Luke 15:11-32) Even criminals. Remember the conversation on the cross, when Jesus turned to the repentant thief and said, ". . . Today you will be with me in Paradise"? That story is found in only one of the four Gospels--only in Luke (Luke 23:42)!

Do you begin to see, then, the special flavor of this Gospel, this gentlest of all Gospels? The sick, the outcast, the despised, the poor, the rebellious, the criminal--all of them feel the focus of Jesus' love and compassion. From all this that Luke remembered, we know more about Jesus, and we know more about Luke, too. Maybe in our response to all this, we know more about ourselves as well. Frankly, some of us do not like this picture of Jesus that Luke paints. What is this? Jesus always taking up for the rabble of the day? Jesus speaking up for the poor! Jesus warning the rich! Doesn't Jesus know who pays the bills at the synagogue? We would prefer a different picture, then, one of Jesus well-dressed, Jesus associating with only the better class of people and commiserating with them about how hard it is to get help nowadays, and about how strange it is that there are so many shiftless, lazy people to be dealt with. It might be that this is the kind of gospel we would turn out, were we doing the writing.

Then isn't this precisely why we need this gentle Gospel? In our brittle day of alienation and brokenness, we need to remember what sort of people our Savior came to serve. We need to think a bit about why we do not have

more compassion for them. How was it Luke put it? ". . . Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick." (Luke 5:31) It is only in Luke that we are reminded that Jesus ". . . came to seek and to save those who are lost." (Luke 19:10, paraphrase) Luke heightens our awareness of the destitute and lost among us. He reminds us that these most unloved and unlovely ones among us are the very ones whom Jesus loved especially, and who need our love as well.

But for ourselves, too! *We* need this gentle gospel. Surely we cannot pretend that we have no need. Oh yes, we build up little facades of respectability about us and outwardly we do not look like the poor, the outcast, the despised. But down deep, down inside the fortress, behind the masks, *we know what we are!* We know our own hidden need. We know the kind of poverty there is inside us. We know where we are twisted and crippled inside. Behind our respectability, we know our own corruption, our own predicament.

Sitting in a New York nightclub years ago, W.H. Auden was struck by the desperate look on the faces of those present. He took his menu, and on the back, he wrote these lines:

Faces along the bar cling to their average day,
The lights must never go out, the music must always play;
Lest we should see where we are, lost in a haunted wood,
Children afraid of the night, who have never been happy, or good.¹³

"Lost in a haunted wood!" Yes, we are, the best among us. *I* am, and I need a picture of one who comes searching, searching, even for me in my well-hidden lostness. And in Luke, that is the kind of Savior I find. In this gentle Gospel, God comes willing to accept my imperfections, and through Christ, offers me life.

There is a story from the Talmud that sums it up. "A certain king had a son who became angry and ran away. The king searched him out, found him, and sent a message asking him to come back home once again. The boy replied in bitterness, 'I cannot return.' The king then replied in another message, 'Return as far as you can, and I will come to you the rest of the way.'"

Study Questions

1. Which story about Jesus do you remember best? Which do you like best? Why do you like that story?
2. Have you ever noticed the similarity between the first verses of Luke and Acts? Whom do you suppose Theophilus was?

3. Do you think that the way people respond to religion is affected in part by what they do for a living? Did Luke's being a doctor make him more compassionate? How does *your* work affect *your* view of Jesus?

4. Does the church today sometimes tend to become clubby and exclusive? What can be done about this?

5. If Jesus paid special attention to the outcasts of his day, who would receive his special compassion today?

6. In all honesty, do you think you would agree with Jesus if he were ministering among us today? Who would be his greatest critics today?

"When therefore I have completed this, and have delivered to them what has been raised, I shall go on by way of you to Spain; and I know that when I come to you I shall come in the fullness of the blessing of Christ." Romans 15:28-29

". . . For there is no distinction; since all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus." Romans 3:22-24

"Therefore, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." Romans 5:1

"I appeal to you therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect." Romans 12:1-2

Romans: The Great Therefore

A travel agent would have loved having Paul for a client, because he traveled incessantly about the Mediterranean world in the mid-part of the first Christian century. But Paul would have been a mixed blessing as a client, because he traveled on a shoestring, or perhaps a sandal strap, and always had to go low budget.

It may be, in fact, that Paul's need to find inexpensive accommodations led him to write his most magnificent letter. It is the first of the letters of the New Testament, and we call it, simply, Romans. How did this happen?

Suppose you were making a low-budget trip to Greece, and your itinerary took you through Rome. Suppose you knew of a group of people there with common interests to your own, and you decided to ask them to put you up for a few days on your way to Greece. How would you approach them? You would most likely write them a letter and put it to them straight: "Could I stop over for awhile? Would you put me up? You have heard about me from some of our mutual friends, and you may know a bit about me, but maybe I had better tell you more about myself and what sort of person I am. Then you can decide whether or not to accommodate me on my journey."

That is just what Paul did, except that he was already in Greece, and he wanted to go westward to Spain, using Rome as a stopover. The year was A.D. 58, and Paul was planning ahead. He first had to go down to Jerusalem to deliver an offering he had collected for the starving Christians there. But then, he said, "When I have completed this, I shall go by way of you to Spain."

(Romans 15:28, paraphrase) The Roman church would make a natural base of operations for him as he worked in Spain. Would they do it?

Some of the Romans knew Paul already, but many did not, and Paul had enemies who often slandered him. So in his letter to the church at Rome, Paul sought to tell them something of what he believed. This is what makes Romans unique. Paul's other letters were written to solve specific problems in churches Paul knew. They addressed specific crises and put out fires. Not Romans. If Paul had given a title to the letter, he could have called it, "What I Believe about God." Let's see what he said.

First, he said, look what God has done for religious people! He has freed us from one of the oldest, strongest, yet most discouraging religious notions of all, that if we would just try hard enough, we could arrive at a state where God would *have* to love us. We must earn God's love, and if we are careful enough, disciplined enough, rigid enough, obedient enough, we can be such good people that God will finally love us.

That, said Paul, was the well-intended function of Jewish law, to spell out in every detail just how we can live in a way pleasing to God. As an educated rabbi, Paul knew every detail of the law. It described just how any rule should be obeyed. For example, the law said that Jews should not labor on the Sabbath. Carrying burdens on the Sabbath is laboring. But are not clothes which people wear burdens which they carry? Technically they are, the law said, but they are permissible because they protect one's modesty. Yes, but what about ribbons on clothes? They are decorations, and are they to be considered burdens? The law dealt with this. If the ribbons were sewn to the clothes, the fine print said, they were part of the clothes and not be considered a burden. But if they were pinned to the clothes, they were a burden and could not be carried on the Sabbath. The Jewish law tried to anticipate every question and let people know in detail how to please God.

Paul considers this kind of issue and asks the obvious question: With such complexities, how could we ever obey the law so completely that God would have to love us? And even if we understand every detail of the law, most of us have trouble obeying it. In one of his most poignant statements about the harshness of religious law, Paul throws up his hands in despair and says, "I do not understand my own actions. For I do not do what I want, but I do the very thing I hate. So then it is no longer I that do it, but sin which dwells within me . . . I can will what is right, but I cannot do it. For I do not do the good I want, but the evil I do not want is what I do." (Romans 7:15,17-19)

Surely Paul speaks for all of us here in our efforts to be good and decent people. We know how hard it is, and we never quite measure up. That is why one of the scriptural calls to worship often used at church makes many of us uncomfortable. It is from Psalm 24, and it has us opening worship by saying,

"Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place? He who has clean hands and a pure heart, who does not lift up his soul to what is false" (Psalm 24:3-4) I do not know about you, but when I hear those words, I start edging back down the hill of the Lord. Clean hands and a pure heart? Not quite, and Paul knew that and said that God sent Christ so that people with soiled hands and impure hearts could also ascend the hill of the Lord. Listen to the heart of the Christian gospel as Paul described it to the Romans: "Since *all* have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, they are justified by his grace as a gift, through the redemption which is in Christ Jesus." (Romans 3:23-24, emphasis added)

Now comes the first of a series of "therefores" for Paul. "*Therefore*, since we are justified by faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ." (Romans 5:1, emphasis added) We do not have to earn God's love, he is saying. God has given it to us in Jesus, to all of us, including those of us with soiled hands and impure hearts. We are freed from the harshness of the law, and we can have peace as we know God loves us.

Someone has told of an old fellow who liked to save string. The old gentleman died, and the family had the duty of disposing of his personal belongings. As they expected, they found several large balls of string the old man had saved through the years. But in one of the desk drawers, they found a cigar box, and on it was a label on which the old man had written, "Pieces of string too short to save."

Is this a parable of God? He saves string too short to save! We are always too short to save, too frayed, too ragged, too sinful, but Paul's message was this--God loves us anyway and forgives us, not because of what we have done to earn it, but because of what God has done in Jesus Christ.

So a second *therefore* flows from Paul's pen. "There is therefore now no condemnation for those who are in Christ Jesus." (Romans 8:1) This is what God has done, and Paul was traveling the ancient world delivering that message.

But does this mean that we do not have to watch our behavior? Is it that we should not even worry about clean hands and a pure heart? Not at all, said Paul, and now comes his greatest *therefore* of all. "I appeal to you, therefore, brethren, by the mercies of God, to present your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and acceptable to God, which is your spiritual worship. Do not be conformed to this world but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may prove what is the will of God, what is good and acceptable and perfect." (Romans 12:1-2)

The first eleven chapters of Romans deal with theology, telling us what God has done. But these next four chapters describe how the person who genuinely feels God's love is going to live. And we read here about integrity

and loyalty and obedience. We read in chapter fourteen one of the most magnificent pleas for religious tolerance that can be found. Paul says that if we have strong convictions about certain ideas of faith, we do not have to coerce everyone else into fitting into our mold. Suppose a fellow Christian disagrees with us about a matter of faith. This is all right, Paul says. "Who are you to pass judgment on the servant of another? It is before his own master that he stands or falls. And he will be upheld, for the Master is able to make him stand." (Romans 14:4)

See the transition here? Paul spent the first eleven chapters talking about theology, but the next four chapters about ethics. Here is how the loved and forgiven child of God will live! Thus we have four chapters telling how we act *in response* to God's love. The distinction is important. We do not do all these decent things *in order to make God love us*. We do them because he already loves us and forgives us and accepts us.

Most ugliness we see in life grows out of not feeling loved. We see that with children and parents, with husbands and wives. If we feel genuinely loved, our lives inevitably reflect that, and we rise to the level of love felt. In our most basic relationship with God, the same dynamic takes place. If we down deep can accept the Christian gospel, that we are loved by God through Jesus Christ, then our lives rise to that level and reflect that love. We are transformed, then, not in order to make God love us, but because we know he does.

Probably the same truth applies in a congregation's life. If we, as a part of God's family, honestly feel the abundance of God's love and grace, would we ever have financial problems in the church? If we, down deep, really feel ourselves loved as a part of his family, would we let tensions pull us apart? The good life, serving and giving and worshiping and all the rest, flows naturally out of any person who feels God's love and forgiveness.

The great American theologian, Reinhold Niebuhr, spent his life teaching about faith in God. Then, at age sixty, he had a stroke which partially incapacitated him. To his surprise, he suffered severe depression and was especially embarrassed at this because he was celebrated as the author of the famous prayer adopted by Alcoholics Anonymous. "God, grant me the serenity to accept the things I cannot change, the courage to change the things I can, and the wisdom to know the difference." Niebuhr tells of confessing his embarrassment to his doctors. "Don't worry," the doctor said. "Doctors and preachers are not expected to practice what they preach."¹⁴

Maybe so, but here is a preaching that Paul practiced. Not in order to earn God's love, but in order to respond to a love freely given in Jesus Christ, we present our bodies as living sacrifices to God. Paul started his letter with

eleven chapters of theology, and then moved to four chapters of ethics. But take special note of how he ended!

He ends with people! Theology and ethics finally boil down to people, and that is how Paul's letter ends. Read that last chapter and it reads like an annotated church directory. Twenty-four individuals Paul calls by name and greets. Mary and Andronicus and Junias, Ampliatus and Urbanus and Apelles, and more. Name after name! Six of the twenty-four are women, showing the role of influence and strength women had in the Roman church.

People are always the laboratory for theology and ethics, and most of us can remember compassionate people far longer than we can remember a definition of compassion. When I remember churches I have served, the hectic experiences of ministry, the financial crises and the spats tend to fade away, and it is people I remember. And so did Paul.

He had talked about courage, but now he says, "Greet Prisca and Aquila, . . . who risked their necks for my life" (Romans 16:3,4) He had talked about dedication, but now he says, "Greet Mary, who has worked hard among you." (Romans 16:6) He had talked about integrity, but now he says, "Greet Apelles, who is approved in Christ" (Romans 16:10) He had talked about compassion, but now he says, "Greet his [Rufus'] mother who has been a mother to me too." (Romans 16:13, Phillips)

We can dress faith in theology and in ethics and it looks noble and fine, but in people it takes on life. So with us. We can talk about the evils of apartheid and dissect it theologically and ethically, but those of us who have had the opportunity of working with a dedicated South African pastor begin to think of people. How much pain and hope and love is mixed together in their thinking. We can talk in theory about compassion and its theological and ethical base, but theory fades away when we remember one individual whose life is an example of compassion and caring.

People! It is how theology and ethics get communicated, and Paul knew that and so ended his letter with people. A young woman once became an active and loving member of a church. Someone asked her, "Whose preaching was it led you to Christ?" She responded quickly, "It wasn't anybody's preaching. It was my Aunt Martha's practicing."

God loves us and gives us forgiveness and peace, said Paul. Therefore, we live lives that reflect that joy. And when Aunt Martha and we put that joy into practice, a lot of persons are led to Christ.

Study Questions

1. Why do you suppose Paul had so many enemies within the church of his day?

2. Do Christians today tend to become legalistic, and identify a list of dos and don'ts that identify a "good" person? How would Paul respond to that?

3. How do you respond when you hear someone read Psalms 24:3-4 as worship begins? Why do you respond that way?

4. Does anyone ever live such a good life that God has no choice but to save him or her? What does Romans 3:23-24 mean to you?

5. What causes disharmony within a congregation? Can persons who genuinely feel God's love participate in enmity and dissension with one another?

6. Name the persons you have known who translate into daily life the great qualities of faith Paul mentions.

"And they came to Ephesus, and he left them there; but he himself went into the synagogue and argued with the Jews." Acts 18:19

"Remember that you were at that time separated from Christ, alienated from the commonwealth of Israel, and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world." Ephesians 2:12

"For he has made known to us in all wisdom and insight the mystery of his will, according to his purpose which he set forth in Christ as a plan for the fullness of time, to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth." Ephesians 1:9-10

Ephesians: Brokenness and Healing

Almost imperceptibly, we began to feel the plane begin its descent. We were at 38,000 feet, high over the North Atlantic, heading for Amsterdam. Soon the clouds beneath us disappeared, and far below us an array of green fields appeared, fenced and terraced, a checkerboard of greens and blues. Neat ribbons of road could be seen, houses and villages, almost a fairyland of quiet, pastoral beauty.

"Where on earth are we?" I wondered, and from a row or two ahead came the surprising answer. That land of peaceful beauty below was Northern Ireland, a land whose serenity was riddled with fierce religious hatreds, Catholic versus Protestant, neighbor against neighbor, ugly and bitter. How exquisitely beautiful and peaceful it looks, I thought, even as I knew that hidden away out of easy sight was brokenness.

And then the thought struck me--it's not so different from driving down Ward Parkway, is it? Beautiful houses, lovely churches, green yards, fenced and terraced, quiet beauty. And yet, any reasonable person knows, hidden out of sight is brokenness, though no one driving down that street could easily see it. A home disintegrating, a scared teenager, a desperate wife, a frantic husband--all hidden behind those neat walls. It is a reality of life! So many marriages broken and discarded. Broken relations between parents and children. Friendships broken, promises broken, inner peace broken, unity in

the church broken. Confidences are broken, and so are treaties and solemn agreements. Broken dreams, broken hearts, broken word. War breaks out, we say, and arguments break out, and those are the breaks. He is a broken man, we say, and poet Langston Hughes says that when dreams die, "...life is a broken-winged bird that cannot fly."¹⁵ Brokenness!

Is this something new? Have we invented brokenness in our fast-paced age? Sometimes it would seem so, but nineteen hundred years ago, someone looked at the world about him and decided that brokenness was a central fact of life itself. So he sat down and wrote an essay about brokenness. That essay became our New Testament book called Ephesians. Tradition holds that this was a letter written by Paul, the early Christian missionary. He wrote it to the people in the church at Ephesus, a city located on the west coast of what we today call Turkey.

However, the oldest manuscripts of this New Testament book omit any reference at all to Ephesus, and the letter's style is unusual. It contains no personal greetings, as Paul's other letters do. The last chapter of Romans, for example, is typical of Paul's writings. It is almost a church directory for that early congregation in Rome. "Tell Aquilla and Priscilla hello for me--they risked their necks for me once. Greet Mary. Tell Urbanus hello. Say hi to Aristobulus' family." To the Philippians, Paul wrote, "Epaphroditus is here with me, but he got sick." "Tell Euodia and Syntyche to stop fighting!" Paul's writings usually contain many references such as these, but there is almost none of this in Ephesians. It is a different kind of letter.

Because of its style, then, some scholars suggest that the letter was written not by Paul, but by one of his loyal followers, and it may have served as an introduction to an early collection of Paul's letters. In any case, the more important thing is, what does the book say?

The very first teacher of preaching I ever had was a Missourian named Cecil Cheverton. I was only eighteen, a student at Texas Christian University in 1949. Dr. Cheverton's central point to us fledgling preachers was this: "Always make sure that you can summarize your sermon in one clear, simple sentence. Write that sentence down at the top of your first page, and let all that follows help make that simple sentence clear and understandable."

If I had to summarize the letter to the Ephesians in one sentence, it would be this: *The world is falling apart, but God wants the Church to help bring it back together again.* Now many poets and philosophers have echoed this diagnosis of brokenness in the world. W.B. Yeats put it this way: "Things fall apart; the centre cannot hold; Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world."¹⁶ Paul saw this falling apart of things in just about every human relationship, but he said that there was a solution to it. God's answer to brokenness is the

Church and the gospel of Christ. But look at how brokenness invades every area of life.

There is, said Paul, a great cosmic battle going on between good and evil spirits in the world, and so there is a universal brokenness to contend with. "For we are not contending against flesh and blood," he wrote, "but against the principalities, against the powers, against the world rulers of this present darkness" (Ephesians 6:12)

He sees brokenness in the disobedience of God's own people, those who were alienated from God. He reminded his readers of the times when they were ". . . separated from Christ, alienated . . . and strangers to the covenants of promise, having no hope and without God in the world." (Ephesians 2:12) A tragic separation exists between God and his people.

Moreover, said Paul, there is a brokenness inside the Church, a fragmentation, as men and women put themselves and their small issues above the unity of the Church. Thus, in the Church, we are apt to be ". . . tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the cunning of men, by their craftiness in deceitful wiles." (Ephesians 4:14)

But Paul saw fragmentation at home, too, domestic tensions that tore families apart. His ancient marriage counseling fit his own time, however, when women were little more than chattel. "Wives," he said, "be subject to your husbands" (Ephesians 5:22) That word is frequently quoted, but Paul rose much higher than this in the less frequently quoted verse which comes just before. "Be subject to *one another*," he said, "out of reverence for Christ." (Ephesians 5:21, emphasis added) It is a mutual subjection of love and respect that he sees between husbands and wives. But clearly, in the families of Christian folk, he saw brokenness, and he yearned for healing.

Finally, his circle narrowed to the individual personality. There is an inner tension, an inner fragmentation, within all of us. Hear Paul again: ". . . we all once lived in the passions of our flesh, following the desires of body and mind, and so we were by nature children of wrath" (Ephesians 2:3) He is describing that inner disunity which pulls us in many different directions. A poet once described Judas in this way: ". . . a city full of spirits, and they riot in the streets."¹⁷ Most of us hear that, and recognize it, and we know what Paul meant when he described an inner brokenness within each of us.

Now is that enough fragmentation and brokenness? The condition is as prevalent in our day as it was in Paul's, and so Paul's answer to brokenness is tremendously timely for us. The message of Ephesians is healing and unity. Listen to it! "For he has made known to us...a plan...to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth." (Ephesians 1:9-10)

Say it again: "To unite all things in him!" The Church is meant to be a unifying force, not further tearing us apart, but unifying us, bringing the torn

parts together again and sewing them up and letting them heal. Whether that brokenness is between nations, or within churches, or inside families, or here in my own torn heart, the gospel of Christ is meant to lead us to wholeness and peace and congruence.

Then it falls to us to identify our own role in the brokenness of the world. Be honest, now! Are we breakers, or are we menders of brokenness? Hurters or healers? Breakers down, or builders up? Are we God's agents in his plan "to unite all things in him," or is it because of us that brokenness exists?

Ask that in the setting of the Church and its unity. Anytime a group, an organization, is founded on voluntary participation and made up of a wide variety of people of different temperaments and interests, disagreements are certain to take place. What do we do about them? Each of us inevitably choose to be either breakers or healers in such a setting. Strangely enough, whenever the Church catches fire and is threatened, there are always those who bring buckets of kerosene to dump on the flames!

I like the story of the rather tight-fisted individual who had to buy a birthday present for an out-of-town friend. The prices of the good stuff were all too high. But in a nice gift shop, he spied a beautiful seventy-five dollar vase on sale for five dollars because its handle had broken off, and it needed mending. He immediately purchased the vase and had the shop mail it to his friend, who would think the beautiful vase had been broken in the mail. Some-time later, he received a thank-you note from his friend. "Thank you for the beautiful vase," the note said. "It was especially nice of you to wrap each piece separately."

It makes me wonder. If our church were *mailed to God*, how many packages would we need? We decide on how much brokenness we are willing to tolerate in our own family of God!

Paul's letter, then, is not just an essay on brokenness and unity. It is an exhortation, a pleading, to each one of his readers, and across these centuries, to us today, *to come down on the side of healing*. Each of us in so many different settings is either a jackhammer, tearing apart, or a glue, holding together. At home, at the office, at church, at the bridge club, in the voting booth, we keep facing the choice. Do we choose brokenness and thrill to its gritty excitement, or do we choose healing and exult in the unity it brings? One of our best gifts to God is nothing more than a stubborn refusal to participate in brokenness. Whatever else others may do, we can say, I will not contribute myself to fragmentation and disunity.

I often remember with gratitude an older woman in Texas, one who in a small act of understanding chose not to be offended with me, when she might well have done so. She was ill in the hospital, and I had come by to visit. I was relatively new in the church, still getting acquainted with people, and

Ellen was one of those many persons I needed to know better. As our visit in the hospital room ended, it became clear that she would appreciate a prayer from me. I clasped her hand and called on God to be with her and to give her healing and courage.

The final sentence of the prayer was to be ". . . and Father, I pray that you would be with Ellen and give her strength." But even as I coasted down the hill of that last sentence, I realized that I had forgotten her name! It was one of those fractions of a second in which your whole life flashes before you. Like the skier headed down the slope, I had committed myself, and I could not turn back. "And Father, I pray that you would be with . . ." and I paused, ". . . would be with . . .," and she gently squeezed my hand and said softly, "Ellen," and I recovered and went on. Following the amen, I started to apologize, but she would have none of it, and the incident was never mentioned again. *But think what she could have done with that story!* In the circle meeting, at the bridge club, she could have entertained them with the story. "Do you know what that preacher did? Why, he . . ." But she never told another person about it. She never mentioned it, and until this moment, neither have I. She refused to allow brokenness, and when in another city, ten years later, I read of her death, I breathed a prayer of love and gratitude for one who in a small act of kindness had joined God's plan to keep all things united in him.

Now suddenly, back to you, to me. So many opportunities, good opportunities, for us to be hurt, angry, bitter. So many persons whose thoughtless actions deserve brokenness, almost demand it. That daughter-in-law, that co-worker, that neighbor, that so-called friend! Look what they did! Good cause for anger. No one would blame you. Then which shall it be? One more act of brokenness, or one more act of healing?

If we are convinced that the Christian's call is to healing and unity, I wish that it could be made retroactive, and that we could turn loose of bitterness and anger for good. All those hurts, those grudges, those bitter feelings, brought right here in this holy place and turned over to God, done with, forever. Then wherever you are torn and bleeding and broken, let there be healing and oneness, and together we will join God's plan ". . . to unite all things in him, things in heaven and things on earth." Amen.

Study Questions

1. Does it seem to you that there is more brokenness in life now than there was when you were growing up? Less? Why is this the case?

2. If God wants the Church to mend brokenness in the world, why is there frequently brokenness inside the Church? What is the greatest threat to unity in the Church?

3. Think of the last time there was dissension in your church. What finally healed the brokenness?

4. Although Paul told wives to be subject to their husbands (Ephesians 5:22), he also told both husband and wife to "be subject to one another." (Ephesians 5:21) Why do we hear so much more about the former than the latter?

5. Can you suggest some specific things Christians can do to heal the brokenness that exists between nations today?

6. Jesus prayed that his followers "may all be one." (John 17:11, paraphrase) Why does church unity seem such a difficult goal?

"And he came also to Derbe and to Lystra. A disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer; but his father was a Greek. He was well spoken of by the brethren at Lystra and Iconium." Acts 16:1-2

"The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. And I am the foremost of sinners." I Timothy 1:15

"If you put these instructions before the brethren, you will be a good minister of Christ Jesus, nourished on the words of the faith and of the good doctrine which you have followed." I Timothy 4:6

Timothy: How to Keep the Church Alive

What do you do when the church gets sick? You are not sure what is wrong, but obviously something is. Some of the people are feverish and some are chilled. The joints are aching, the circulation slowing, the old energy gone. The church is ailing. What do you do?

A young minister once went to serve a church like that. It was supposed to be a great church, vigorous and strong. But after a short time there, the young minister must have said something like this: "What is the matter with this church? What ails it? I keep hearing talk about how good it used to be, but look at it now! The people fight with one another, and are so concerned about little issues that they have forgotten why the church exists in the first place. They keep saying how good it used to be when Dr. Paul was minister here, but not now. What am I going to do?"

The young minister's name was Timothy, and he served the church in Ephesus about A.D. 65. The apostle Paul was Timothy's mentor and his predecessor. It was Paul's recommendation that had sent Timothy there as minister after Paul left. Paul was now in Rome in jail, and he apparently heard about the problems with the church at Ephesus. He knew of Timothy's confusion and discouragement, and so he wrote two letters to Timothy, both containing advice about how to pastor a sick church. We call those two New

Testament letters, along with a similar short letter to Titus, "the pastoral epistles."

Paul knew the Ephesian church. He had served it when it was young and vigorous. But now that the first glow of enthusiasm was waning, Timothy was left with a cranky church, a church discouraged and quarrelsome. We can imagine how eagerly he would have read those two letters from Paul. They were, in a sense, a manual for ministers, a treatise on how to pastor a church. So their title, the pastoral epistles.

So what does Paul's advice to the troubled minister of an ailing church have to do with you and me? Nothing at all, if we belong to a perfect church. If our church can leap tall buildings in a single bound and never know dissension, and all the members are candidates for beatification, then Paul's two letters to Timothy can tell us nothing. We can spend these moments taking inventory of the hymnal or searching for typos in the worship bulletin. But if every once in awhile our church's pulse seems irregular and its vision blurred, Paul's advice may be helpful. He moves back and forth in his letters between two basic questions. One is, what is wrong with the church. The second is, what can we do about it?

First, what are the symptoms of the church's illness? Paul knew churches and church people well, and he reminded Timothy of certain undeniable facts about the church.

To begin with, the church is sinful, and it will always be fighting sin inside itself. Many church folk eagerly sign up to fight sin outside the church, forgetting that the fight constantly goes on inside the church as well. And this is inevitable, because the church is made up of sinful people.

"Timothy," Paul seemed to say, "the only raw material you will ever have to build a church with is sinful people. But you ought to be qualified to lead them because you are sinful, too, and so am I." Listen to Paul: "The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners. And I am the foremost of sinners . . ." (I Timothy 1:15)

Most problems in churches then and now come from people who forget this. Pride is abundant among most church folk and most ministers. How carefully we construct lists of respectable and unrespectable sins. The unrespectable sins the state deals with. Steal a car or rob a bank or assault someone, and you will go to jail. The respectable sins settle in at church. Gossip. Backbiting. Narrow vision. Overweening pride. We should never be surprised when we in the church are narrow-minded and clubbish and unloving, because we are sinners, and that is why Christ Jesus came into the world, to save us, and that is why the Church exists in the first place. If a minister does not know this about his people, he cannot serve them, and if he does not know it about himself, he has no business serving them.

Therefore, Paul said, your people are going to forget the point of church and depart from their faith. (I Timothy 4:1) They will become more interested in their traditions and their social groups there than in the reason for the church's existence--to save sinners. This is especially a danger as any church gets older. Any church establishes certain traditions, and as time passes, those traditions become more precious than the church itself. The wine bottle becomes more precious than the wine, and we scarcely recognize that it has been emptied.

The church, then, as time passes, becomes a pleasant club to belong to. We like the associations, the events, the traditions. As one person is supposed to have said, he belonged to a certain church because at its dinners it served the best food in town. When the wrappings of the church become so important, people are deceived into believing that they are religious, when they are merely active and busy. It is said that on a Scottish tombstone are carved these words about a certain Angus McDonald. "He was not a particularly religious man, but in all other respects he was an ideal churchman." It is easy to forget why there is a church at all.

So it should not be surprising, said Paul, that your people in church are going to fuss with one another. Fighting creates a certain spirit and excitement, and some folk mistake that for faith. So they will fuss and quarrel. About what? About almost anything, said Paul. He knew that the first church fight in Jerusalem involved the church dinners. No, the quarrel was not about the quality of the food served. They cooked it themselves. Fussing about cooking is a luxury limited to people who have other folk cooking for them. They fussed in Jerusalem over which group got served first. Read about it in Acts 6:1-2.

But about other things, too. People in Paul's churches argued over how to serve Communion, over wearing hats in church, over haircuts, over eating meat purchased from the local butcher shop, over slavery and rules about second marriages and who got to talk in church.

Amazing, isn't it, that we come face to face with God in divine worship in his holy church, and we go away centered on whether the sanctuary was too hot or too cold, the music too loud or too soft, the hymns too new or too old! The gospel makes us do everything except behave ourselves! It has been pointed out how ludicrous it would be to have a group of musicians who came together weekly and discussed music but never played it. They heard speakers talk about music, they analyzed great themes and minor variations, they studied the lives of the composers and talked about which brand of instrument was best and argued over who got to use certain rehearsal rooms. And then the hour ended and, with no music played, they all went home.

Great music is to be played, not debated. Great religion is to be lived, not argued. But in Ephesus and a thousand other modern places, church folks, who have forgotten why there is a church, divide themselves into teams and have at it. So there you are, Timothy, Paul was saying. Any church you serve will tend to be smug and scrappy, because that is the way the church gets after a time.

So, what can we do about it? We love the church, and we do not like for it to be ailing. What can we do? Paul has some answers.

First, any church has to have doctrine. "I do not like theology," someone will say. But theology simply means faith, and daily life always grows out of faith. Someone might as soon say, "I don't like seeds; just give me flowers. I don't like acorns; just give me oak trees." The Church exists because God sent his only begotten Son so that all who believe on him might have eternal life. It is the Church's mission to say that, and never take for granted the fact that people already know it. The Church is, first and foremost, the Body of Jesus Christ, and Paul put it to Timothy directly, "If you put these instructions before the brethren, you will be a good minister of Christ Jesus . . ." (I Timothy 4:6)

Anytime the church centers on itself alone, anytime it grows cliquish and proud, anytime it forgets that it is more a hospital for sinners than a gallery for saints, it needs to get back to basic doctrine. A visitor to a church on a dreary Sunday once listened to the small congregation struggle through "Onward Christian Soldiers." The last verse begins, "Onward, then ye people, join our happy throng." Three things were wrong with that, the visitor later said. First, they were not a throng. Second, they did not appear happy. And third, they did not seem to care whether anybody joined them or not! Paul's first prescription deals with this. You must have doctrine, and remember why you exist as a church in the first place.

Second, you have got to have good conduct in the church. If you cannot get along with one another in church, if you cannot be loving and patient, how can you ever expect the world to do it? It is a strange fact that the worst some people ever act, the most domineering and unloving they ever are, is at church!

But again and again in these two short letters, Paul advises Timothy to make the people behave themselves. "Remind them...to avoid disputing . . .," he says. (II Timothy 2:14) "Have nothing to do with stupid, senseless controversies . . ." (II Timothy 2:23) "Avoid such godless chatter . . ." (II Timothy 2:16) "As for the rich in this world, charge them not to be haughty . . ." (I Timothy 6:17)

"Good deeds are conspicuous . . .," Paul said (I Timothy 5:25), and this is where church folk ought to concentrate. The church depends on it, and the

church will always be ailing if its members see church membership as an honorary degree. In the church and many other areas of life, so many people are ready to carry the stool when it is time to move the piano. You must have good conduct among men and women who, through the church, profess to be followers of Jesus Christ.

And you must have organization for the church to function effectively. Some people fault these two little letters because in them, Paul speaks often of organization, the offices of elders and deacons, who is eligible for these offices, and what are the duties. (I Timothy 3-5) As the church in Ephesus grew older, it was increasingly important to devise an organization that would ensure its continued existence. The church is always just one generation away from extinction, and structures have to be accepted in any church that will see that it does continue.

Right here, many critics speak up. "I like the message of Jesus, but I don't like organized religion." When ministers today hear someone say to them, "I don't like organized religion," many of them quickly respond, "Then you will love *our* church, because it is marvelously disorganized at times." But the statement should be taken seriously.

Yet, isn't it basically absurd to say, "I like religion, but I don't like *organized* religion?" Can you imagine someone saying, "I like classical art, but I don't like museums"? Or, "I like law, but I don't like courts"? Or, "I like medicine, but I don't like hospitals"? Thus far, God has not granted us the ability to preserve anything good except through careful and intentional organizations. The important distinction is that with which we started. We honor organization, not as an end in itself, but as a means to a worthy end. Organization, boards, budgets, and structures are means to a greater end, the sharing of the gospel of Jesus Christ.

We know the organization is imperfect and cumbersome, even burdensome at times. The poet Alfred, Lord Tennyson put it this way:

Our little systems have their day;
They have their day and cease to be;
They are but broken lights of thee,
And thou, O Lord, art more than they.¹⁸

The church is always a broken light of Christ, and Paul knew it. Through these two letters, then, he puts it straight: Church people, he said, because you are sinful, you need to be careful, for you will tend to forget why your church exists, and you will become quarrelsome and cranky. To avoid this, you must have doctrine, you must have good conduct, and you must have or-

ganization. In short, "Do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a workman who has no need to be ashamed...." (II Timothy 2:15)

Study Questions

1. On a scale of 1 to 10, how close to (or far from) perfection is *your* church? What overall grade would you give it?
2. Do you think most people see the church as a place for sinners, or as a collection of saints? In what way do both definitions contain truth?
3. Should the church have a way of weeding out of its membership those persons whose conduct is unacceptable? Who would decide on the persons to be weeded out?
4. Do you enjoy hearing doctrinal sermons preached? Why do we hear fewer doctrinal sermons today than we did in former generations?
5. Do you see the church's organization as a help to its mission, or a hindrance? How do you think the organization of your church could be improved?
6. How important is your denomination in helping keep your church true to its mission? How much do you know about the way your denomination operates?

"For the word of God is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow, and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart." Hebrews 4:12

"Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us." Hebrews 12:1

"Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful; and let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near." Hebrews 10:23-25

Hebrews: What to Do When Faith Burns Out

The Problem: "I don't know what's wrong," the man said, "but church just doesn't mean as much to me as it once did." The two men were drinking coffee together and were being honest about their feelings. "I've always been a Christian, but sometimes now it just doesn't do anything at all for me. I know you can get burned out with your job, but what do you do when faith burns out?"

The man's question is a good one, because it does happen, and wishful thinking will not change it. Faith *does* burn out. Although we may have been active in the church for decades, something happens, and our faith has a meltdown. Now, to prevent others from suffering from the fallout of our disillusionment, we encase our melted-down faith in a hard concrete shell of pretense, or of indifference. We continue the same motions, but the power is not there anymore. Faith burns out.

For some it happens suddenly. The meaning just is not there anymore, and we wonder why we have gone to so much trouble in the past. For these sudden meltdowns of faith, the result is disappointment, even anger. Remember the news account of those tourists who went to South America to see Halley's comet at its best? The story contained this description: "A female voice shrieked from the darkness of some Inca ruin on a hilltop near Cuzco, Peru. 'That's it? That's all there is? You mean I came four thousand miles to see

this crummy little fuzzball?" And down comes the house in disappointment. Occasionally it happens just this suddenly in faith. You mean this is it?

But more often it happens to us so gradually that the awareness comes hard. We still are warming our hands at the fireplace of faith, but there's no fire there. The drudgery of the duties of faith begins to take its toll and wear us down. When faith is found in a house of God, with a family of God living there, there is housework to be done, and many persons who exult in the grandness of faith wither before faith's daily duties. The most faithful church members are most subject to this, because they are the ones called on to do these duties year after year.

A fellow once came in from work to find his wife relaxing in the living room, and the house in an utter shambles. He looked about at the mess and asked, "What on earth happened?" Her answer was, "You know how you always come in and ask me, 'What have you been doing all day?' Well, today I didn't do it!" Think what it would be like if you came to church, and no one had done the housework! The Zen Buddhists, whose religion concentrates on moments of spiritual enlightenment, have a disarming little saying that reminds us of this: "After enlightenment, the laundry!" Do you get it? No matter how wonderful the spiritual experience is, you must move from it to the ordinary tasks of life, the laundry, the kitchen, the yard. I suppose the day after Albert Einstein first stumbled onto that stupendous formula, $E=MC^2$, he still had to pay the grocery bill and have his shoes repaired and get a haircut.

For some, the absolutely unending household duties of faith take their toll. We come to church carefully guarding our little spark of faith, hungry for refueling. Then the minister reminds us that we are behind in our budget and have only six weeks left before the financial year ends, and we need to pay our pledges. Yes, we know the church exists only because of careful planning and budgeting, and that these details are important, but we finally weary of this and say "Enough!" and faith burns out. After enlightenment, the budget! After enlightenment, the tuck-pointing of the building! After enlightenment, the menu for the family night dinner! Faith burns out, and what do we do about it?

The Book: Around A.D. 75, a New Testament book was written that dealt with this issue. The church now was in its second, even third generation, and the first glow of faith had worn off. Now it was necessary to say something to those Christians who had been in the church all their lives, and who were being hard-pressed to stay energetic and faithful. Paul may have been the writer of the book, although it does not identify its author, and the language and style are quite different from Paul's other letters.

The author's purpose was to encourage Christians whose faith was getting old and burning out. Their hands were drooping, he said, and their knees were weak (Hebrews 12:12), and drooping hands and weak knees have always been bad symptoms for Christians. Moreover, they were not only growing complacent and apathetic inside, they were also facing persecution from without (Hebrews 12:3-11). They needed encouragement to hold on.

The book of Hebrews reaches across these centuries, then, and brings life to those of us today who find our faith flickering and our loyalty wavering. It is a book whose thirteen chapters we do not know very well, although there are some extremely well-known verses embedded like jewels in its pages. It tells us what to do when faith burns out.

The Solution: As we read the book and let it focus light on our own frail and wavering faith, some steps to deal with religious burnout become clear. What do we do when faith burns out?

First, those people needed to remember Jesus, whose life is at the heart of it all. Sometimes in church, the picture we have of Jesus is put into a gargantuan frame, and the frame tends to become more important than the picture. We polish the frame, paint it, redecorate it, enlarge it, discuss it, and forget the picture inside. In the midst of all our activity in church, we sometimes forget what it is all about. So the author of Hebrews puts it directly to his worn-out friends: "Therefore, holy brethren, who share in a heavenly call, consider Jesus, the apostle and high priest of our confession." (Hebrews 3:1)

Yes, the budget is important, but consider Jesus. Sure, the building is necessary, but don't forget Jesus. Of course, the daily duties have to be done, but remember Jesus. In moments of severe testing, when we are low, when we are tempted, when we are grief-stricken, it is not how well-run the church board is that strengthens us, it's the presence of Jesus. So the author of Hebrews devotes much of his book to a description of the greatness of Jesus. (Hebrews 1:2-4:13)

Jesus is greater than the angels, greater than Moses, greater than the high priests. "Since then we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus, the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession." (Hebrews 4:14) When faith burns out, remember Jesus.

Second, remember the word of God. When the pieces of life keep falling apart, remember that there is a manual telling how to assemble it right. Try reading the instructions! "For the word of God," says Hebrews, "is living and active, sharper than any two-edged sword, piercing to the division of soul and spirit, . . . and discerning the thoughts and intentions of the heart." (Hebrews 4:12)

You have it, he said, so read it! Charles Allen used to offer a prescription to business and professional men who came to him burned out and disil-

lusioned in faith. He advised them to read Psalm 23 out loud, five times a day, once on getting up, once after breakfast, once at lunch, once after work, and once just before bedtime. Don't read it silently, he said, but out loud. Don't read it five times all at once, and get it over with--spread it out. Let his words become a mantra, flavoring, marinating your life. Allen called it *God's Psychiatry*, and many people found the flame burning again because of it. When faith burns out, remember the word of God.

Third, remember other people whose lives have been meaningful for you. Chapter 11 of Hebrews is perhaps its best-known section, because the author remembers there the heroes of faith whose courage serves as an example to all of us. There were so many, he said, he could not list them all. "And what more shall I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets--who through faith conquered kingdoms, enforced justice, received promises" (Hebrews 11:32) And his stirring conclusion after his long list of heroes of faith? "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us . . . run with perseverance the race that is set before us" (Hebrews 12:1)

You have your own pantheon of heroes--a parent, a teacher, a friend--and their examples can be just the thing to get your faith flaming again. When faith burns out, remember that cloud of witnesses who have made you better than you might have been.

Fourth, don't neglect worship. Yes, there are duties there, housekeeping to be done, but this is the place where batteries can be charged and the flame relighted. Hebrews puts it straight to its readers: "Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, . . . not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another" (Hebrews 10:23, 25) Do not neglect to meet together!

Two fellows once sat in front of a fireplace watching the flames die away to glowing coals. They, too, were discussing church. "I do not see why it is so important to go to church, said one. "What good does it do to be there all the time?" The second man took the poker, reached into the fireplace, and raked one of the brightly glowing embers out to the edge of the hearth, well away from the others. As the two men watched, in seconds the once-glowing ember, now isolated from the fire, blackened and went out. And the second man said simply, "Is that enough of a reason?" When faith burns out, remember worship.

And one other thing, a strange reminder to come from the author. Maybe your faith is burning out because you think about faith too much! Listen to J.B. Phillips' translation of this remarkable verse in the book: "Let us leave behind the elementary teaching about Christ and go forward to adult understanding. Let us not lay over and over again the foundation truths--repen-

tance . . . , believing in God, baptism and laying on of hands, belief in the life to come and the final judgment. No, if God allows, let us go on." (Hebrews 6:1-3, Phillips)

Don't spend all your time looking inward. It is fascinating to speculate about some of the mysteries of faith, but don't build your house there. Schopenhauer once warned that if you look into the void long enough, the void starts looking into you! The real measure of the success of any Bible study program, for example, is not how much you learn there, but how ready you are to lay the Bible on the table and move out into some kind of service--putting that well-rehearsed faith to work.

Therefore, many of the latter pages of Hebrews detail this challenge. Be kind to strangers. (Hebrews 13:2) "Remember those who are in prison, as though in prison with them" (Hebrews 13:3) Work on your marriage. (Hebrews 13:4) Take your faith outside! The most unhappy people in the world are usually those who are the most self-centered and these *can* be the most religious people among us. *Then find ways to forget yourself for awhile.* In a world of lonely, hurting people, it is inexcusable for any of us to be lonely alone--there is so much we could be doing. Faith burns out when it gets no air, so open the doors of your life, move away from yourself, and you will find a world of people who need you and who will get the flames going again.

Do not think that you are invulnerable. Faith *does* burn out among the best of us, sometimes suddenly, sometimes gradually. If it does, says this remarkable book of Hebrews, remember Jesus, remember God's Word, remember the heroes of faith, remember worship. And above all, reach outside yourself, and let the flame be lighted once again.

Study Questions

1. Does *your* faith seem to go in cycles, being strong for a time, and then weakening? Can you see any pattern to these cycles?
2. Can you think of some ways to renew the interest of a friend who has dropped out of church?
3. What are the most frequent reasons for the burning out of faith in people you know?
4. If you have been a member of several churches in your adult life, how does the vitality of each of them compare?
5. If you have been a member of your present church for many years, have you seen it go through ups and downs in its vigor? Can you identify causes for this?
6. Why do some Christians seem to consider worship and Bible study unimportant? How can your church renew interest in these things?

"And his mother and his brothers came; and standing outside they sent to him and called him And looking around on those who sat about him, he said, 'Here are my mother and my brothers! Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister, and mother.'" Mark 3:31,34-35

"So his brothers said to him, 'Leave here and go to Judea, that your disciples may see the works you are doing. For no man works in secret if he seeks to be known openly. If you do these things, show yourself to the world.' For even his brothers did not believe in him." John 7:3-5

"But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves." James 1:22

James: The Embarrassed Brother

It is an unusual family that does not have at least one member off somewhere who is a little odd, and a source of embarrassment. In normal circumstances, embarrassment in a family is usually limited to teenagers, who are somewhat abashed to have to admit to their friends that they have human parents, that this middle-aged man and woman walking in are their father and mother. We are all familiar with that. But beyond this, many families have to deal with a member who is unusually bad or unusually good, and in either case, embarrassment results.

It is hard to think of it, but the family of Jesus suffered a great deal of embarrassment because of him, and a case can be made that one of the later books of the New Testament grew out of the embarrassment of one of Jesus' brothers. His name was James. How did it happen?

James, embarrassed and concerned, stood outside the house wishing the whole thing were over. Jesus was acting up again. He had come back to Nazareth after one of his unpredictable absences. They said he had recruited a group of followers. They said that strange things were happening, things that were either good or bad, depending on who reported them. Now, Jesus was involved in some commotion right there in Nazareth, his hometown, and someone had sent word to his family, James and Joses and Judas and Simon,

his brothers, and Mary, his mother. "You'd better come get Jesus," they must have said.

So James and the others had come to the house in Nazareth where the disturbance was taking place, and sure enough, there was a crowd of people about the house. Inside, once again at the center of it all, was Jesus. This was by no means the first time they had been concerned about him, and James stood there, wondering what ever would become of his strange brother, Jesus. Soon the word was passed in to Jesus that his family had come, and with characteristic idealism, Jesus had looked about him and said, ". . . Here are my mother and my brothers! *Whoever does the will of God is my brother . . .*" (Mark 3:34-35, emphasis added)

How this incident ended, we do not know, but it could be that as James heard these words, "Whoever does the will of God is my brother," seeds were planted that thirty years later would give birth to the New Testament book that bears James' name. We do know that there was a strained relationship between Jesus and his brothers. Jesus later remarks sadly that he has no honor among his own family and in his own house. (Mark 6:1-6) It is said even later that Jesus' brothers did not believe in him and urged him to leave the country. (John 7:3-5)

Not much of a recommendation, is it, for Jesus' embarrassed brother James! And yet, not many years later, this embarrassed brother was leader of the church in Jerusalem. (Acts 12:17, Galatians 2:9) He was chairman of the board! (Acts 21:18) Paul says that James had received a special vision of Christ. (I Corinthians 15:7) And most of all, for centuries, the tradition of the Church was that it was James, Jesus' embarrassed brother, who had written the most simple, practical letter of the New Testament, one which emphasizes above all else the importance of "doing the will of God." It is the letter of James.

We do not know for sure that it was written by Jesus' brother. There are a half-dozen persons named James in the New Testament, including two disciples and the father of a third. Some scholars note that the style of the book is too Greek for Jesus' brother to have written it and also note that it contains no personal remembrances of Jesus whatsoever. If Jesus' brother had written the letter, would he not have included some reference to their early days together? As interesting as it is to speculate about the author, it is the message of the book that is most important. Einstein's theory of relativity would still be true if it were Jones' theory or Smith's theory or even Brice's theory of relativity. It is not the author of the book, but its contents, that give it value for today. Nonetheless, we acknowledge the traditional view that Jesus' brother James was the author. The contents of the book fit what we might expect from an embarrassed brother who for thirty years had remem-

bered Jesus' turning aside from him, saying, "Whoever does the will of God is my brother"

Look then at this jewel of a book, and see what word God offers us through it.

Above all else, the letter of James emphasizes doing. It was written as a corrective to trends the author saw developing among church people--such a fascination with theology, with intellectual debate, that the simple art of daily living as a Christian was being overlooked. We find very little philosophy in this book, and almost no theology as such. Questions such as the nature of God, life after death, the incarnation, the cross, the virgin birth, the grace of God--they simply have no place in the book of James.

Does this mean that James believed none of these things? Of course not. It does mean that James' purpose was to warn people that the final test was not one's theology, one's clever intellectual exercises. It was how one acted. Someone has observed that if a philosopher wanted to know what we believe, he would ask us questions, but if Jesus wanted to know what we believe, he would simply follow us around for a day or two. As James put it in the key verse of his book, "So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead." (James 2:17) It was an important corrective then, just as it is today. Sooner or later, the time comes to stop talking and start acting.

Talking is a lot easier, no doubt about it. A husband and wife come in to talk. They do not get along well. They are both intellectually minded, and the talk proceeds in a predictable manner. "I need to enhance your personal self-esteem," says one. And the other says, "And I must enable your self-fulfillment." "Perhaps I can adopt a creative mode in relationships," says the first, and the other responds, "I will seek to bring about shared peak experiences." The counselor, after much of this, may break in and say, "Enhanced esteem and enabled fulfillment and creative modes are nice and often helpful, but let me ask this: can you be nice to one another? Can you occasionally hold your tongue? Is it ever possible to forgive?"

It is a peculiar seduction of religion, especially for sophisticated folk. We can go from an intimate sharing group's discussion of love, straight to the telephone where we dissect a targeted person bone by bone. We can move quickly from a church school class's discussion of personal integrity, to a cheating and deceitful act on our own part. We can specialize in ideas and let actions be self-serving.

James undoubtedly had his fill of this. All sorts of peculiar questions about Christian religion had begun to emerge: was Jesus really human, or was he spirit? Would the world end immediately or was it a good way off? Must Greek Christians accept Jewish purification laws? As head of the church in Jerusalem, James had to preside over meetings where these were the issues.

And no wonder that memory kept coming back to him, that embarrassing moment when Jesus had said, "Whoever does the will of God is my brother, and sister"

Therefore, in the five chapters that make up this fascinating little book, James found repeated ways to say, "But be doers of the word, and not hearers only" (James 1:22) He found two ways to emphasize the overall importance of personal conduct.

First, he said, you start by controlling yourself! Your careless speech, for example. More than any other New Testament writer, James saw the importance of controlling our tongues. Listen to what he says: "Let every man be quick to hear but slow to speak" (James 1:19, paraphrase) "So the tongue is a little member and boasts of great things. How great a forest is set ablaze by a small fire! And the tongue is a fire" (James 3:5-6) "Then do not speak evil against one another, brethren" (James 4:11) "If anyone thinks he is religious and does not bridle his tongue but deceives his heart, this person's religion is in vain." (James 1:26, paraphrase)

Have we heard enough about this, those of us who fall time after time to the ugliness of gossip and slander? If you do not bridle your tongue, do not boast about your religion, for it is in vain! And what about personal decency? James put it sharply, "Therefore put away all filthiness and rank growth of wickedness and receive with meekness the implanted word, which is able to save your souls." (James 1:21)

Combining his interest in personal decency and controlled speech, James could not understand how Christian people could fall to cursing. With the tongue, he said, ". . . we bless the Lord and Father, and with it we curse men, who are made in the likeness of God. From the same mouth come blessing and cursing. My brethren," said James, "this ought not to be so." (James 3:9-10) Clearly, the place to begin in religion is to control yourself.

The second step, he said, is to help others. James gave a special warning to those who are financially comfortable. In comparison with the rest of the world, this includes all of us in this enormously blessed land. Perhaps we would feel that James has quit preaching and begun meddling, but as uncomfortable as it may be, listen to what he says: "Come now, you rich, weep and howl for the miseries that are coming upon you. Your riches have rotted and your garments are moth-eaten. Your gold and silver have rusted, and their rust will be evidence against you and will eat your flesh like fire. You have laid up treasure for the last days. Behold, the wages of the laborers who mowed your fields, which you kept back by fraud, cry out; and the cries of the harvesters have reached the ears of the Lord of hosts. You have lived on the earth in luxury and in pleasure; you have fattened your hearts in a day of slaughter." (James 5:1-5)

Strong words, indeed! So what does James want of us? He puts it clearly and succinctly. He wants us to find ways to put our faith to work, to reach out to those in need today. Again, let James say it for himself: "What does it profit, my brethren, if a man says he has faith but has not works? . . . If a brother or sister is ill-clad and in lack of daily food, and one of you says to them, 'Go in peace, be warmed and filled,' without giving them the things needed for the body, what does it profit? So faith by itself, if it has no works, is dead." (James 2:14-17)

Does all this have a familiar ring? As we listen to these words, James, the embarrassed brother, begins to fade out, and it is Jesus we are hearing, and he is saying, "Not everyone who says to me, 'Lord, Lord,' shall enter the kingdom of heaven, but he who does the will of my Father who is in heaven." (Matthew 7:21) "Why do you call me 'Lord, Lord,' and not do what I tell you?" (Luke 6:46)

The message of James is the message of Jesus, with all the theology shucked off, standing there open before us, bringing us life. Once a traveler in England had lost his way after wandering through the complicated maze of streets of a London suburb. He stopped a young boy and asked, "Can you tell me how to get to the train station?" The boy thought a moment, then answered. "It's a bit complicated, sir," he said, "but what you do is this. Turn left up there by the pub, go two blocks and turn right, and that will bring you to a place where five streets intersect. And then, sir, you had better inquire again."

Never understate the importance of faith in Christ. It is our faith that has brought us thus far in our journey. But life brings us to some intersections, and maybe for us, too, it is time to stop and inquire again. And if we do inquire, we are likely to hear Jesus, or perhaps his embarrassed brother James, saying, "You be doers of the word! For faith, if it has no works, is dead!"

Study Questions

1. If the author of this book was not James, the brother of Jesus, which James do you think wrote it? Why?
2. Martin Luther called James "an epistle of straw." Why would he have said this?
3. The best-known verse in James is "faith without works is dead." (James 2:17, paraphrase) What is the strength of this verse? What is its weakness? *Can* there be faith without works?
4. How do you feel about these persons who are "doers of the word" (James 1:22), but seem to have no faith in Jesus Christ? Is it better to have faith without works, or works without faith?

5. If James condemned the rich of his day (James 5:1-5), what would he say to us today?

6. Why did James ignore such basic Christian beliefs as life after death, the cross, the grace of God, and others? Why are such beliefs important?

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